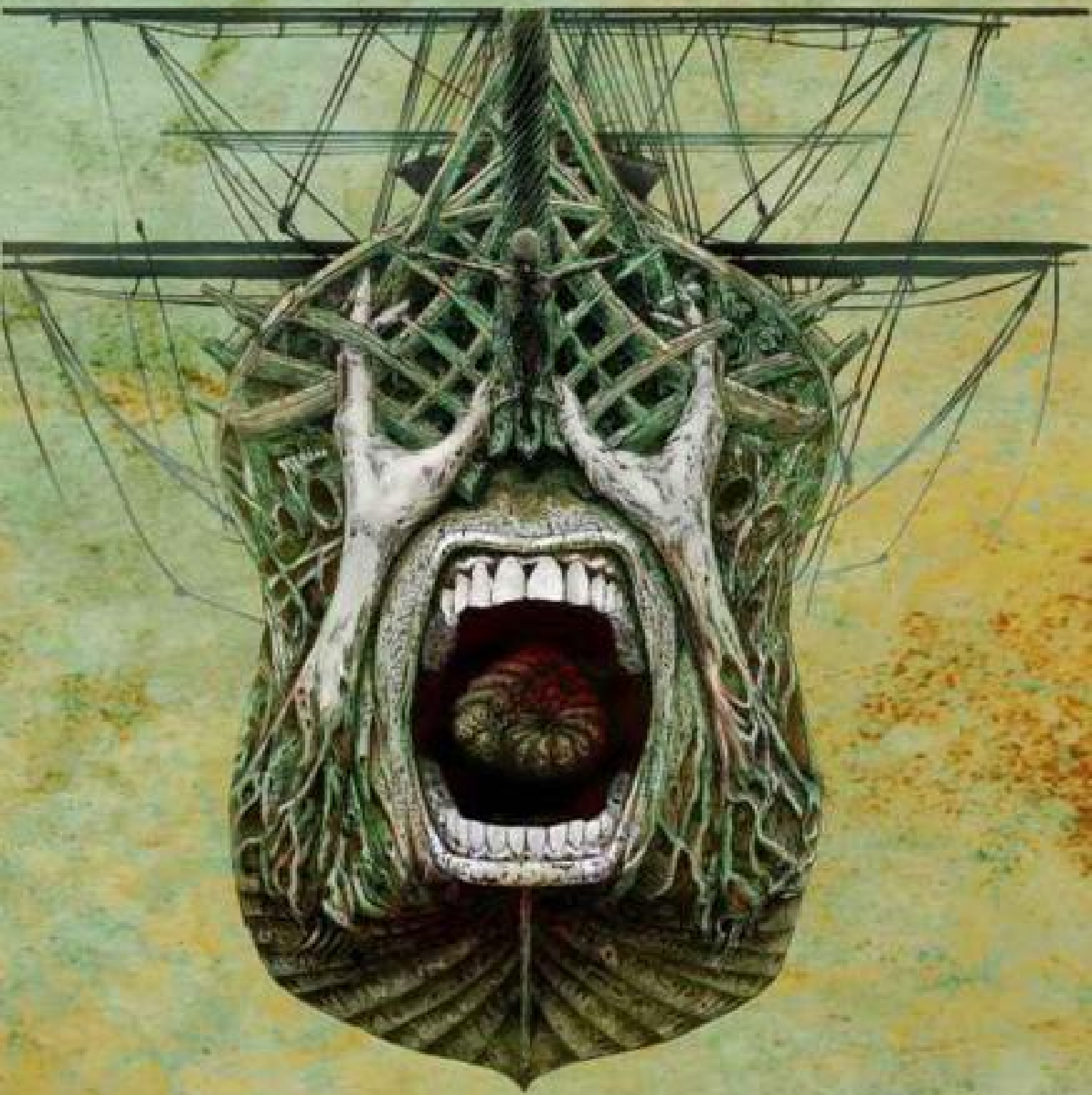


ADE GRANT

THE MARINER



THE MARINER

Ade Grant



Also by Ade Grant

POETRY

Zigglyumph and Other Poems

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

Rotten Philosophy (Out Of Print)

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*For she who keeps me sane
Without you I too would be lost*

Special thanks to the Hayes brothers

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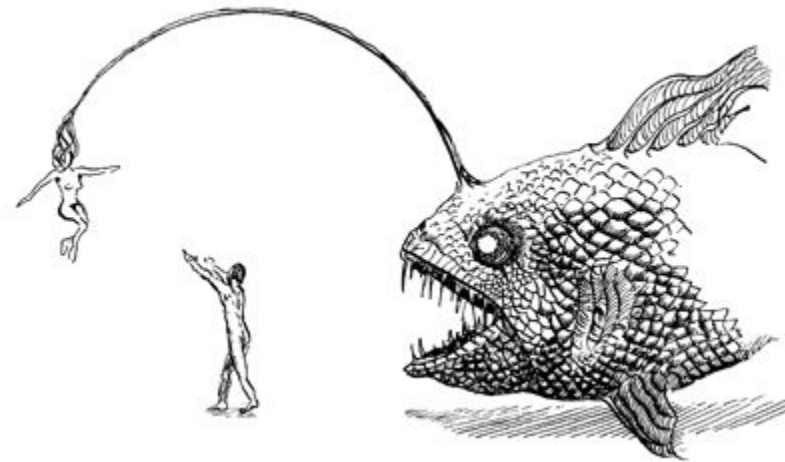
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Prologue

PORT JACKSON, 27th JUNE 1790

GOVERNOR ARTHUR PHILIP CLENCHED A handkerchief tightly against his nose, yet still the stench prevailed. It stormed his nasal cavity as an invading force, routing resistance, exploiting all weaknesses. He'd known pestilence before; the camps of Sydney Cove were rife with the stink of disease, yet here, aboard this ship, the fumes were amplified to an almost spiritual plateau. No earthly cause could create such potency, at least none he'd ever known.

His right hand man, Wandsworth, was busy retching air; the contents of his stomach, just as revolted as he, were unwilling to leave the safety of his innards. The poor man would right himself, swallow what phlegm he had as if to form a plug in his throat and then, with tremendous vigour and persistence, rub his fleshy face, trying to attain some semblance of the professional administrator he'd been just a half-hour before. The charade never lasted for long; soon he was back convulsing in the corner.

Philip's presence had been requested shortly after the grim ship docked. The hapless inspecting officer, a skinny runt of a man named Smith, now waited on-hand, his face as blank as night water.

The Neptune, one of a small fleet of convict ships, departed Portsmouth on the 19th of January. Five months later little of her cargo remained, that cargo being four hundred men and eighty women, each and every one forced to endure a torment beyond comparison.

The governor asked after the Neptune's master, his voice low through shock and muffled by handkerchief.

"Donald Traill, Sir."

"I want him arrested."

A fly buzzed towards Philip. He instinctively ducked, not wanting to be touched by something that had existed in this hell, something that had grown fat by profiting from the misery of those ensnared within.

"I'm afraid that won't be - huuurrgh - possible, sir. The company was paid to bring each passenger here. The - urrrmmmp - contract didn't stipulate they needed to survive... There's no... I mean..." Wandsworth dabbed his lips despite the lack of spittle upon them. "They haven't broken any rules, sir!"

As if revelling in their legal loop-hole, the Neptune's crew had slaughtered those in their charge. Smith's first estimation was that at least a third had died from disease, malnutrition and abuse. The rest, the 'survivors', held onto life like drying sand.

The governor turned to the inspecting officer, too horrified to be angry. "What happened here?"

Smith's moon eyes swivelled with unease, yet his businesslike tone remained stoic. "Scurvy, dysentery, typhoid fever, even a breakout of smallpox. Malnutrition also appears to have been quite rife. Before their diseases could finish the task, many seem to have simply starved to death."

As he spoke his eyes were drawn to the nearest corpse. It was chained to the floor, flesh yellow and brittle. Whoever the man had been, death was the only release he'd enjoyed from his shackles; dried excrement caked his waist and pooled beneath.

"Are you telling me they ran out of food?"

Smith ran his tongue over his lips and his left hand trembled, yet still his voice remained steady. "No sir, it seems they just didn't distribute it. There's plenty still in storage."

Wandsworth muttered a silent prayer, shaking his head at the rampant barbarism.

"I've never seen a convict ship built so.. cruelly efficient," Philip said. "No space spared."

"No sir, they're not normally like this. The Neptune was a slave ship initially, transported Negroes to the Americas. Hence the need to pack 'em in, sir." Smith spoke with pride at knowing such trivia.

A thought penetrated the governor's shocked state. "Didn't you say women were aboard?"

"Yes sir, around eighty."

“Have you interviewed any?”

“Yes sir.”

“What was their account?”

Smith hesitated. “Well... they are whores after all.”

Philip gritted his teeth. “I didn’t ask you their crime. What did they tell you?”

“Widespread reports of rape. Accusations against the crew and captain. Also... humiliating punishments, being stripped naked and the like. One woman threw herself overboard in an attempt to take her own life, rather than suffer any further.”

“Did she succeed?”

“Oh yes of course, sir.”

The governor looked about the room, a testament to the truth in the inspecting officer’s words. This particular cabin was horribly cramped, and yet forty men had been kept here for five months, unable to move, barely able to breathe through the muggy air. Five months of hell. He shook his head in disbelief. “Starvation, rapes, humiliation-”

“Whippings too, sir. Lots of floggings took place on the top deck. The captain’s daughter was well known to this lot. I would guess the punishment was dished out with relish.”

The ‘captain’s daughter’ was the cat ‘o’ nine tails, a cotton whip of nine strands that inflicted parallel wounds, the scourge of disobedient sailors throughout the British navy. As if to prove his accusations, Smith pulled up the shirts of several nearby corpses. The first attempt proved nothing, as

he pulled the garment back a rotten layer of skin came apart from the friction, sliding across the corpse like greased paper. Beneath, foetid flesh turned liquid began to flow onto the floor. Smith quickly pulled the shirt back down to mop up the mess, whilst the governor looked away.

Lifted shirts on fresher corpses revealed scars so complex they appeared like weaved parchment.

“Tell me, Smith. Have you ever seen anything like this?” Philip gestured to the scene before them.

“Yes sir.”

“Really? When was that?”

“When I was a boy, sir. In church... someone showed me a picture of Hell.”

The survivors of the Neptune were quickly taken to the camp’s makeshift hospital. All were horribly wasted, their flesh tight about their bones. Most were too ill to move, whilst all were completely infested with lice, which crawled sluggishly about their scalp and groin. Convicts told tales of ritual torture, sadistic in tone, the guards taking great pleasure in the cruelties they bestowed.

The governor oversaw the unloading, giving Wandsworth time to search for any legal means to bring retribution against Donald Traill and his crew, each of whom Philip refused to meet until his assistant reported. When the summary was finally submitted, it made disappointing reading.

With the law failing to aid the dignity of the convicts, Philip instead saw to their physical condition, personally donating

what little fruit he had in his personal stock to bring relief to a handful of scurvy-ridden. He grimly watched as one bit into a lemon with vigour, only to have his fragile teeth snap off on impact. The poor creature sucked deeply on a mix of his own blood and citric juice, grimacing from both relief and exquisite pain.

As the last living convict stepped foot on soil, Philip turned to Wandsworth, more composed now he was out of the suffocating dark of the Neptune's belly. "I want that ship put to sea. Not tomorrow, not later today, but now."

"We'll need to bring the corpses off first, sir, and we should probably quarantine them on board until we can dig enough graves. It could take time. Days."

"This land is already blighted with disease. We teeter on the brink of disaster. Can we afford to send able-bodied men into harm's way any more than we have done already? Would that not be inviting the Devil himself into our midst?"

"It would certainly put the encampment under increased risk, sir," Wandsworth agreed.

Philip shook his head, not just in sadness, but incomprehension. "They even shot at whales, did Smith tell you that?"

"No sir." Wandsworth thought about reminding the governor that his afternoon had comprised of hastily constructing the complex legal report now forgotten in the governor's hands, but decided against. Under the circumstances it would seem trite.

"They did. They even took pleasure in torturing whales." The setting sun cast a red glow across the governor's face, giving the impression he was gazing into the very Hell he

was imagining. "I don't think I trust myself to meet the master of the ship. I don't know what I might do."

"The Neptune has a contractual right to empty her cargo, sir."

"I don't care. Send her away, with Traill and his men, or without them - damn the legal ramifications! We'll be lucky to live long enough for that. This land is rejecting us, and once the men hear about this, they'll despair even more."

He turned and walked towards the encampment, rejecting the sight of the Neptune. "That ship's not fit for the living, Wandsworth, and I hope no-one in Her Majesty's Empire ever sets eyes on her again."

PART I

ROTTEN PHILOSOPHY

“The greatest good for the greatest number is the measure of right and left.”

Jeremy Bentham

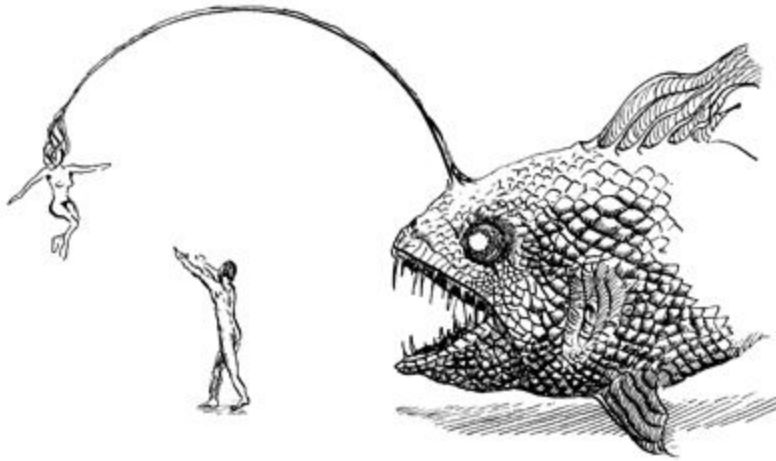
“Philosophy is like trying to open a safe with a combination lock; each little adjustment of the dials seems to achieve nothing, whilst dynamite is more effective.”

Mudwigg Fittenshine

“I sink, therefore I am.”

Denny Daycart





1

THE FIRST NIGHT OF OUR TALE

THE MARINER AWOKE WITH THE screeching of the devils. He vomited onto the deck, the contents of his stomach spread before him, a dark pool, as dark as the wine he'd drunk the previous night. Was it black from the grape alone? Or had his blood contributed to the mix? He watched it flow away, in keeping with the boat's gentle rocking, and then he watched its inevitable return. It lapped at his face like a polluted shoreline, sour bile matting his beard. The Mariner didn't move. It was enough that he'd opened his eyes.

He did not get sea-sick. The sea was no problem; sea was life and land was death. Each step upon soil left him worse off. What little attractions the land had to offer - tin cans stuffed with food, battery powered torches, lighter fuel in plastic cartons - each were rendered insignificant next to the awesome drawbacks of human company. Any contact beyond his ship and his devils decimated the isolation in which the Mariner lived. It was a familiar loneliness; it helped focus his mind.

What didn't focus it was red wine. But that distraction was almost all gone now, filtered through his liver in a constant stream. The stockpile had lasted many weeks, but all good things must come to an end. The Mariner knew this well. A lot of good things had ended. And a lot more would end soon.

The ship was ancient yet sturdy, far too big for its solitary crewman. Enormous sails billowed in the wind, casting the ship onwards, towards the distant yet familiar horizon. They creaked as they adjusted themselves, one of only three sounds he could hear. That, the sound of the waves breaking against the hull, and, of course, the devils.

One was nosing itself above deck. He could see its small snout edging open the door, black nose about a foot from the ground. They must be hungry, normally the devils were content to prowl below, hunting for rats. Quite how the rats sustained themselves, the Mariner did not know, food had become as scarce as the wine.

The devil finally poked its head through the door. The creature looked a lot like the rats it hunted, although body, black fur with a white stripe, was the size of a small dog. It looked at him, nose twitching and big pink ears alert. It was Grace, the mother of the brood. They'd pushed her out their den to harass the human for feeding.

She ran across the deck in a strange skipping, ambling way familiar to all devils. Stopping just shy of where he lay, she waited to be presented with a meal.

"I'm s'ry g'l," he mumbled. "Th's no food."

Unimpressed, and with the tiniest ounce of hope she sniffed the pool of vomit. He thought she might lap it up, but instead she wrinkled her nose and backed away. The Mariner

took this as a very bad sign. There must be something dreadfully wrong with his gut; he'd seen her eat from corpses left in the sun for weeks.

Sitting on her haunches, Grace had still not given up hope of rousing the drunk monkey, a fleshy vending machine that often dispensed meat when there were no rats to find. "Arf!" she barked, warning him to get a move on.

He cursed, knowing that he'd be in trouble if he didn't rise soon. Grace had bitten him many times before. Several fingers on his left hand had almost been lost to the beast, yet still he allowed her pack to stay. A folly, as Grace now licked her chops as she stared at his nose. "I'm going to try to get up. Give me a second." The devil didn't respond, but watched with interest as the Mariner's limbs twitched and tensed.

After a minute or so, the devil lost all patience, and Grace let loose a screech. It was a horrible sound, guttural and vicious, like a terrified animal being slaughtered. Her hot and pungent breath hit his face, and finally, out of a desire to keep his eyes and nose from her small but sharp teeth, he pushed himself onto his feet.

"Arf!" she said again, satisfied things were finally moving in the right direction.

The Mariner swayed giddily, and not from the sea. Clasped in his right hand was one of the bottles from last night. He looked at the faded label. 'Merlot'. From somewhere called 'California'. He didn't recognise either name. Perhaps California was the small island he'd found the bottles upon, all piled up within a derelict house, but he doubted it. That island couldn't have supported whatever fruit or beast had

given such wonderful nectar. Just another dead island. One among many.

Upon the bottle was a picture of a ship. It was clearly not his own, it was smaller, cleaner and not as laboured, but he liked to think that icon depicted in essence his 'Neptune'.

"Bluuuugghhheeeeeek!" Grace, frustrated with his slothful pace, shrieked and proceeded to savage his foot. Her teeth tore at his thick boots, already peppered with bite marks from previous altercations. Despite her fury, the Mariner felt flattered. If she'd wanted to hurt him she could have bitten into his jeans and taken a chunk out of his thigh. She would have enjoyed the taste too. He knew from experience devils enjoyed human flesh.

Chuckling to himself as she flung her small body about his boot, the Mariner staggered across deck. It was dusk and already stars were beginning to define themselves against the darkening sky. How many days and nights had he been at sea? The Mariner could not say. He remembered nothing else but the endless ocean and the ceaseless searching.

Below deck the air was thick and stale. The Mariner didn't like to descend beneath the Neptune's boards. It was the devils' territory and the close wooden hallways felt oppressive. Given the choice he woke, slept, ate and crapped on the deck above. He found that if he trusted the weather, more times than not it would look after him. Days were hot and the rain was hard, but it never scorched his flesh beyond repair, nor blow him into the surf. The weather served his purpose. Hadn't it guided him this far?

Each cupboard proved bare. The Mariner could not remember his last meal and his stomach gurgled at the

thought. As if to keep him on message, Grace's stomach growled even louder as she scampered about his ankles.

"Alright girl," he said, knowing he didn't have long to please her. In the dark peripheries her children gathered, each hoping for some morsel of food to tide them over. It was an enormous pack, a dozen pairs of eyes trained upon his every move, a dozen mouths watering at the thought of meat. Although small, their teeth were sharp. If they decided to turn against the Mariner, he would not last long. And neither would his remains.

Only a small piece of dried beef jerky remained. Its plastic packet was pushed into the furthest recess, crumpled and forgotten. He picked it up. On the front it claimed all sorts of energising promises, but the Mariner had never felt different after eating one, only full and bloated. On the back it said 'Best Before' and then a string of numbers that made no sense. Gibberish. Just like the faded label on the bottle of wine.

The Mariner winced at the memory. Why had he allowed himself to become so dependent upon such a perilous drug? Yet dependent he'd become and with the wine running out he was sure to reap the demons it'd sown. Their roots would knot in his belly, twisting his insides until he wanted to tear out his own guts, then their branches would rise up to tangle about his spine, shaking him till his very mind came loose.

Grace didn't give a shit. All that concerned her was the beef jerky, still clasped in the Mariner's hand, and the question of whose mouth it should enter, his or hers?

"Arf!"

He pulled the packet open and savoured the dry savoury smell. Inside, the jerky look ancient, sweaty and far removed

from the concept of 'meat'. It also looked delicious. The Mariner was desperately hungry, a little food might go a long way in delaying the alcohol pains, but he also knew that if the devils were to survive they'd need Grace's strength to hunt the few elusive rats. So instead of feeding himself, he dropped it to the floor.

Grace snapped the jerky between her jaws, her long whiskers quivering with delight. Without a grunt of thanks she scurried into the shadows, a brief cacophony of scrabbling claws signalled her broods pursuit. The Mariner was left alone, with only the groans of the ship and distant muffled yaps.

He did not linger, but instead chose to return above deck. There was no more food, and very little wine. He should try to resist the alcohol demons as long as possible before opening the last bottle. Perhaps he could buy himself enough time to find land again, and then plunder it for supplies? But hadn't Absinth warned him about the lack of land out here? Or had it been the Philosopher Woman? With a mind so full of fog it was impossible to remember.

For not the first time, the thought of suicide popped into his head. He had a gun, a whole case-load in fact. Semi-automatics that could pop the top of his head clean off with enough bullets in the magazine to keep his skull flipping in the air like a cowboy's hat. The devils wouldn't miss him. This was their ship, not his.

Suicide was a possibility. He was sure he had the guts to put a gun in his mouth, fuck it, he'd tickle the barrel with his tongue as he pulled the trigger. Dying didn't scare him. But after that? After the dying, then what? What lay beyond? The uncertainty filled him with terror.

No, no suicide. The ocean would decide his fate. The ocean, the air and the Neptune herself.

Back above, the wind was picking up, though not enough to cause concern. The ship rose and fell steadily, with enough rhythm to welcome sleep, though sleep would not come easy. Consciousness had only lasted ten minutes at the most, yet sleep was all he had to turn to. The Island was not in sight and he did not want to be awake when the pains began.

He looked into the sky, eager to spot a bird that he could follow or some other hint at distant land. There were neither. Not even clouds. Just open sky and infinite water. And he a lone sailor, adrift with ravenous demons both inside and out.

But then – something out at sea! A shape moving though the waves, pale silver just as they were, but causing displaced water to appear black, ripples of darkness giving definition to the beast. It moved gracefully and his heart raced at the thought of it being a dolphin or seal or some other helpful creature. He strained against the barrier, desperate to see the first piece of strange life in months.

It was a woman. Her pale skin shone in the brine beneath long raven hair. He could see her arms pulling the water aside as she swam breast stroke, heels alternately breaking the surface with each gentle kick. She was not exhausted nor desperate, hers were the actions of a lady at leisure; someone going for a brief swim before dinner, rather than one lost in the middle of an endless ocean.

The Mariner craned his neck looking from horizon to horizon, trying to see her ship, but there was none. Just the sea. Just her. And just he.

Closer now, she was a woman of youth, flesh healthy and soft, skin without blemish; a stark contrast to his own aged, scarred and sun burnt exterior. To his delight he saw she was naked, and surely she was aware of his presence, yet there was no modesty, either feigned or real. She swam as if it were an absolute delight. A natural joy.

The Mariner tried to speak, but his mouth had dried up. Shamefully, he stiffened in his jeans, but that could be excused. He hadn't seen another thinking person in months, let alone a beautiful woman! Surely someone so brazen could forgive lustful thoughts? He paced back and forth, eyes fixed on the approaching figure.

He decided he would cast her a rope, pull her on board, then ravish her right there on the deck. Stars above, flesh below. It would be sweet, perfect, just like his dreams. He gathered a length in his arms, preparing for the opportune moment.

Below, the devils began to howl, though the Mariner was beyond noticing. All that existed to him was she; just her perfect round buttocks as they poked above the surface and her thighs opening and closing with each thrust.

The woman stopped swimming just beyond throwing distance. Her legs fell from behind and sank into the depths as she straightened to tread water. No sign of struggle could be seen; she floated buoyantly, shoulders clear above the surface, breasts firm and full. The Mariner's lustful eyes did not remain on them for long, they were drawn to the maiden's face. It was the archetype of heavenly, the embodiment of fantasy. The Philosopher Woman had spoken of Plato's Form of Beauty and now it swam before him. Her large eyes called to his soul and her lips called to his loins, though she did not look at him.

“Come closer!” he called, clutching the rope in one hand and waving with the other. “I’ll pull you out, just swim a little further!”

She smiled. Not at him, her head was turned to the side as if looking at an imaginary lover, someone sharing the eternal waves, and the Mariner felt briefly like a spectator, a customer across from her in a bordello. That was nonsense of course. He was here and she was there, down in the cold night’s waters.

He felt giddy. Perhaps the water wasn’t as chill as he thought? Perhaps he should dive on in?

In one smooth motion, the woman lifted her arms out of the sea and placed her hands upon the surface. Instead of sinking, her hands found purchase, arms tensed, and she lifted herself up. The Mariner watched in amazement as her whole body climbed clear out. First her breasts, then her stomach, and finally her legs, giving a fleeting glimpse of her sex. Against all logic, she sat upon the surface as if it were a raft, rising and falling with the waves, each one only breaking a little as it clashed upon her thighs.

The Mariner wanted to take in the whole sight, to drink the image of her body, but he found it difficult to look away from her face. That sly smile beneath tragic eyes.

She raised her hands to her breasts, cupping them, pushing them together. Between her fingers he could see her nipples, erect and large, dark against her skin. She opened her mouth, letting out a gasp, her tongue moist and delicious.

The Mariner undressed, eager to join the woman below. But at the back of his mind was a voice, perhaps a voice in tune

with the devils' howls of protest, that said he should stay on deck. The water meant death. It always had.

The sea temptress leaned back, placing one hand behind her to steady herself. The other she traced a path along her right leg, running up the inner thigh, from knee towards the hips. As she drew near to her destination she parted her legs, knees raised, sex exposed to him fully for the first time.

The Mariner doubted he'd wanted anything more. Not company, food or wine. Not even The Oracle which he sought every day. All he wanted was to put his face between those milk white legs, taste her and lose himself in her scent.

If only she would look at him!

The cold night air whipped about his body as he removed the last of his garments. He was naked now, just as she. Exposed in equal measure. His cock was hard, ridiculously so, desperate for release. Without realising, he took it in hand as he watched. Without thinking, he pumped it as he craved.

Her hand had traced its way up her thigh to her opening. She slid a finger up and down, feeling the length of her lips, teasing forth the moisture within. In a powerful motion she threw her head back, crying out in pleasure. Hair, only a moment before soaking wet, but now dry and perfectly groomed, cascaded around her shoulders.

Faster and faster her fingers worked, at first teasing her clit, then moving down to dance inside. Her hips rose and fell, fucking an invisible lover, a lover that could be him, if only he dared join her.

The Mariner felt warmth rising within and a tingling spreading from his groin. He could no longer resist, he came, his cock spilling his seed over the side in a great arc. The thick white substance hit the water below as a tiny sticky string. Literally a drop in the ocean.

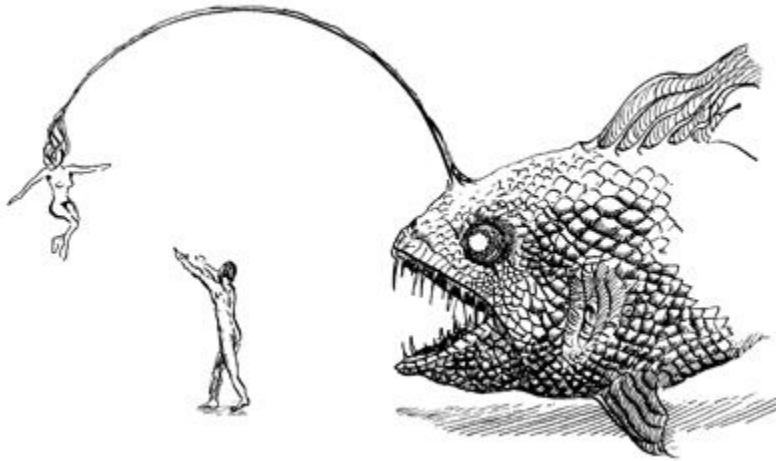
And as it did, the woman, still in the throes of ecstasy, lost all substance. Her dark hair melted into her flesh, her fingers blended together, her arms fell into her chest. Her entire body became water, and fell back into the sea.

He looked on in disbelief, brought back to reality by the post-orgasm bring-down. All that remained as evidence of the encounter was his sperm, floating in the water below.

But then, so fast that he almost missed it, he saw an eel. It zigzagged out of the depths and in one gulp ate his semen whole as if it were snatching a fly. A flash of muddy brown and then back into the gloom. The process ended so fast the Mariner could almost believe that the whole event had never took place, except for the drying evidence upon his fingers.

The Mariner slumped to the ground, exhausted, naked and confused.

Wretched and alone.



2

BEFORE, A DAY BY THE SEASIDE

THE STORE WAS STOCKED WITH all sorts of useless items; plastic spades, inflatable reptiles, books about places that didn't seem to exist. The Mariner browsed them all, trying to find something salvageable.

Elsewhere, doing some salvaging of her own, sniffed Grace, a plump dog-like creature he'd found tucked away on his ship. She must have snuck aboard at some point during his long journey, and now they were too far from her home to take her back, wherever her home happened to be. He had no idea which island she could have come from. None seemed likely to support these vicious little beasts.

A set of shelves boasting multi-coloured plastic orbs suddenly caught Grace's attention. She wedged her body into the darkness beneath as best she could whilst snapping her jaws at whatever small rodent had fled there, distinctive white markings on her fur the only sight in the shadows.

The deserted storehouse was located at the end of a pier he'd docked alongside. A stubby wooden walkway jutting out of a stony crumbled scratching of an island. This wasn't the island, the one he'd been searching for since memory began, but it never hurt to restock. The pier itself was old and dilapidated, its wooden support beams rotten and dragged into the sea by the weight of their own inadequacies. Faded paintwork, once childish and bright, but now cracked, dull and sinister, lined the gangway. There was no cheer here.

The Mariner moved quickly, always aware that he was at his most vulnerable when on land. Each footfall echoed throughout the rickety structure, the waves below doing little to conceal his presence. At night, this abandoned tomb to the past would have been unbearable, and indeed, even on this bright sunny day, the shadows proved intolerable. It stank of death, all rotten hopes and the ghosts of civilisation.

Finally he found something that may be of use; an elixir, promising protection from the harmful rays of the sun. A shield in liquid form. The Mariner never ceased to be amazed at such finds.

Leaving Grace to her hunt, the Mariner strolled, a little faster than necessary, out the gloomy store. The midday heat was harsh upon his brow, light reflecting off the water scorching his eyes. It seemed as good a time as any to test the new-found potion.

He scrutinized the small white bottle. It claimed to be 'factor 40'. He sighed. Why did all these relics of the past have to fall back on their alchemy to describe what they did? Once squirted out into his hand, he found the contents thick and creamy. He gingerly brought some up to his face, fearful of

some trick. There seemed to be none, the light dabs felt cool against his dry skin.

“You shouldn’t put that on in the daylight,” a female voice called from the shore. “If you put it on with the sun shining you’ll trap the rays in and you’ll cook from the inside-out.”

The Mariner swung round, scrutinising every shadow until he saw her; a thin silhouette warily edging along the pier, keeping close to the side of the store. Her face and build were still concealed, but the light bounced off her tangled copper hair, nestled about her shoulders.

“Who was Winston Churchill?” she asked him, maintaining her distance.

The Mariner found the situation absurd. She was wary of him, just as he was of her, and for the same reason, they feared each other were of the Mindless. But the fact that they were not attacking one another immediately proved otherwise. Surely?

“I don’t know,” he answered truthfully. He’d never heard the name before.

This seemed to throw her. She recoiled as if ready to run, her body braced and tense, but stood her ground.

“Name a country within Europe!”

He thought for a moment, eager to please his questioner and put her at ease. “It’s a trick question. There are no countries within Europe. It doesn’t exist,” he guessed.

“Ha! Ain’t that the truth.”

The Mariner looked down at the bottle in his hand, concerned that his flesh were about to cook, but feeling no heat and sensing no smouldering. "How do you know about this 'trapping of the sun'?" he asked her.

"My father told me," she replied, still tense and prepared for flight.

"Why don't you come out from there? I'm no Mindless."

After a pause she hesitantly emerged from her hiding place and into the light.

He could not guess her age. Hard times would forever mask the natural entropy of her flesh. Yet despite her bruises and scars, her eyes were deep and face noble. She had the toned physique of someone forced to survive on their own merit. The Mariner knew this well. He survived by his own hand too.

"Who *is* 'Winston Churchill'?" he asked her as she drew near. "Is he some sort of pirate?"

She laughed at this, amusement tinged with fear. "He was a British Prime Minister. You should know that."

The Mariner thought hard about it, but could not understand why she would think so. He didn't recognise any of those words. He knew 'Prime' meant 'first'. But the others?

With a snort and a gurgling howl, Grace came bounding out of the store. Her mouth was partially full of rat so all attempts to terrify her would-be adversary were blocked by a pathetic spluttering. Far from being sent fleeing into the distance, the woman seemed delighted.

"A tazy-devil!"

The Mariner was taken a-back - she recognised the strange rat-dog! "You've seen these creatures before?"

"Certainly," she gave him another puzzled glance tinged with fear. "She's a Tasmanian devil." And then, as if explaining to a complete idiot, "From Tasmania."

Just like the strange pirate she'd mentioned earlier, the Mariner did not recognise the name. But 'devil' did seem an accurate description for the mean spirited beast.

"She's due soon."

The Mariner was broken from his musings. "I'm sorry?"

"The devil, she's due soon. Pregnant."

"Is she?" The Mariner was genuinely surprised. "I just thought she was fat. No wonder she's in such a foul mood."

"Oh no, they're all like that. It's just their nature."

Grace, having realised that the woman was no threat and that the half eaten rat was infinitely more interesting than the two monkeys, stopped her assault and laid down, gnawing at the rodent's remains.

"Where are you from?"

"The boat," he replied, pointing to the obvious ship anchored behind.

"No, I mean before."

"Before what?"

She sighed, becoming impatient. "You don't know much do you?"

“No. I guess not.” Clutching at straws, and sensing it was the right thing to do, he asked her the same question.

“London. Originally. My names Isabel.” She held out a small but firm hand. He shook it.

“I don’t have a name.”

She smiled at him. “Why am I not surprised? I shall call you John.”

He smiled back, glad for the company. “John it is.”

Isabel lived in a crumbling house not far from the pier. The island, if it could be called that, seemed to simply consist of an oblong stretch of land, with a pier straddled across a stony beach on one side and a sudden drop back into the ocean on the other. The land itself was littered with great slabs of broken concrete and twisted metal. A wasteland, in all respects. No life. No vegetation.

Just walking was an arduous task. Every step threatened a broken ankle or twisted knee. Jagged shards of glass clenched between rough stone slabs jutted out like traps in a guerrilla war. Walking as the crow flies was nigh impossible, long detours were made to avoid the worst of it.

“What is this place?” the newly named ‘John’ asked.

“Brighton.”

“How did you end up here?”

“I took the train.”

Long ago, the Mariner had read about trains in a book he'd salvaged. They were huge metal transportation devices, like a boat but on land, except they ran on preordained tracks (which struck the Mariner as rather limiting and deeply silly) and could journey without the wind to propel them. He did not see how she could have arrived on this island by train. It was too small to require any land-boats.

The house was the only structure still standing. Once, a long time ago, it had been a part of a network of other identical dwellings, all connected by their sides. Now it stood alone with the broken remains of its sisters attached like deceased Siamese siblings. Yet despite the surrounding destruction, the house had somehow maintained its great height, an imposing lone tooth sticking out of a cancer-ridden gum.

Grace had taken to Isabel's abode instantly, and this helped the Mariner quell any trepidation he might have felt crossing the threshold. The inside was nicely decorated, far nicer than the Mariner was used to. Walls, painted a deep red, were adorned with paintings, and these to the Mariner's amusement were often of boats. The rooms were carefully lined with carved wooden furniture and strange small items with no purpose other than to decorate. A deep contrast to the desolation outside. The Mariner swayed on his feet, mind struggling to make sense of the shift.

She led him to the attic. Like the others, it was beautifully arranged, but this time showing more signs of practical use. Various items looted from the island littered the floor; a spade, a large metallic tub, a wooden bat, cooking utensils, a bucket. A space had been made in the centre of the room to act as a fireplace, a facility Isabel immediately put to use.

It was not long before water was heated and siphoned into the tub. Isabel indicated that the Mariner should undress. At

first he was embarrassed, the situation making him question his appearance, an act he rarely had to do out at sea. But the light was dim, and he realised that she was probably just as bereft of social interaction as he. They could be the last humans alive, so why be bashful?

He slid into the water, enjoying the warmth against his skin, and closed his eyes. He could not remember a time when he'd ever bathed in hot water, but it seemed entirely natural. Steam rose about him, making the candles that illuminated the room flicker. He registered this play of light upon his eyelids and with their opening saw that Isabel had too undressed.

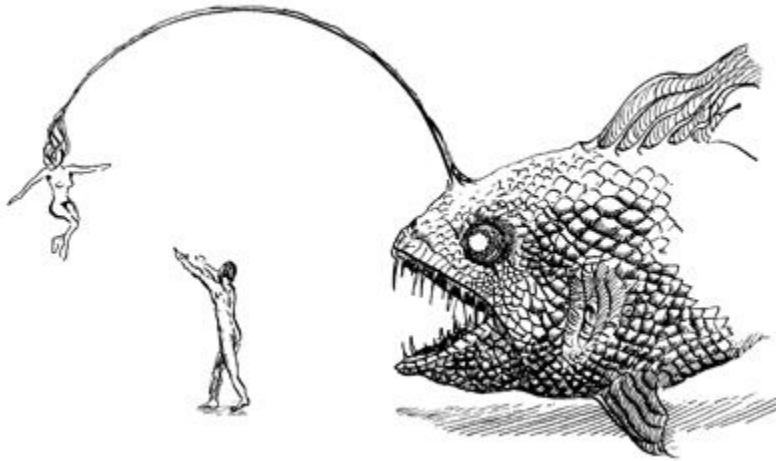
Her body was as tormented as he'd first assumed, but no less beautiful for it. Both he and her were kindred spirits, beaten and abused by an ever-shifting world.

"What's your real name?" she asked as she too slid into the tub.

He shrugged. "John."

They bathed together in silence, and in time they made love.

Not long after that, Isabel was dead.



3

THE SECOND NIGHT OF OUR TALE

THE WIND WAS PICKING UP. It could not yet be felt on deck, but he could hear it in the sails. They protested as they were battered this way and that. The Mariner was pleased there was more wind in the air, perhaps it'd take him to the Island. And from there: the Oracle.

His day had been a dreary one. He'd exercised a little, running up and down the length of the boat. A little was all he could manage though, his limbs were weak and without food he would soon perish. Below, the devils seemed to be doing well, their matriarch had found strength from the jerky and was hunting vermin for the rest. Not that they couldn't hunt themselves, they were resourceful buggers, but even the rats were becoming scarce, and they needed all the guile their devil-mother could muster.

Addiction was gnawing at him again. It had abated during the day, but now that night was creeping in, so too were the pains and the shivers. They would flow over him, as if on the wind, passing through his body and then vanishing, leaving

him exhausted, haunted and perplexed. There was only one bottle of wine left, but it was too soon to give in. He had to delay. He had to

When Isabel had remarked that he knew little, her words had contained more truth than intended. The Mariner remembered nothing of the world 'before' as others he'd met seemed to. Every stranger he encountered, although there had only been a few, seemed to have access to a whole narrative of past experiences as rich as any storybook tale.

Instead of a history the Mariner had... nothing. Just one day he was sailing his ship. The day before that was a mystery. But such is life; memories have to begin somewhere. He didn't even know how to sail. Now that was peculiar. He simply willed the boat to travel and, most of the time, it did just that. Occasionally he'd get a funny feeling he should be pulling a rope here, or releasing a sail there, but mostly it worked itself. The Mariner didn't even realise something was amiss, until he'd witnessed another ship with fully functioning crew. It didn't look appealing to him. So many people must make for awfully cramped living.

The sun had set and yet still the stars were only just beginning to appear. This was not a problem. The Mariner did not navigate, he did not read signs in the sky. He simply sailed. Sometimes he looked at maps and willed the Neptune in a certain direction, but maps were more often than not wrong. Besides, it was more like destinations drew him to *them*. The Mariner owned no compass.

An intrusive chill settled in and the Mariner pulled his coat about him, grateful that his dark locks, which hung down to his shoulders, covered his ears from the worst. It was funny that he should be thinking about Isabel. Usually his thoughts were drawn to the events directly after, when he'd

met Absinth Alcott. He'd had Isabel to thank for that meeting, or perhaps he should curse her for it. Ultimately her actions had led him from there to here, to this landless stretch of a hopeless ocean.

Perhaps it were the woman he'd seen in the water that had got him thinking of poor dead Isabel.

And then, as if summoned by his wandering mind, he heard her. The water sprite. The woman who had visited him the previous evening.

At first he could not see her, her presence only given away by her lustful gasps and giggles that echoed to his ears. He ran to and fro, searching the waters. Finally he realised his error; he'd been looking too far, assuming she'd swim over like before. This time she was already alongside the Neptune, laying upon the surface as if it were a bed.

Once again he was dumbfounded by her beauty. Entirely naked, she was spread before him, legs splayed and hands skimming across her stomach and thighs, stroking, teasing.

The Mariner's lips felt dry. He ran his tongue over them, despite knowing this would lead to chapping in the wind. He didn't care. Tonight he would plant his sore lips upon this woman of extraordinary beauty.

"Who are you?" he cried, but no reply came, unless it were from the wind, a force that seemed to gather with every flick of her fingers.

There was movement to her right. The black haired woman was on her back, the disturbance in the waves behind and out her line of sight. What was it? A shark? Alarmed, the Mariner opened his mouth to warn his would-be lover about

the beast, but further events stole his words before they formed.

A second woman crawled out the water.

She did not look like the first, though if similarity could be found it would be in her equal perfection. This second sprite was more dainty than the first; smaller breasts, slender hips, darker skin and long brown hair. Yet somehow she wasn't as *real* as her counterpart, though of course this thought was preposterous. She was *there*, as real as his own hand.

The brunette crawled across the sea towards her companion, hips swaying in the twilight. The Mariner marvelled at how solid the surface appeared under her hands and knees. A shifting floor, moving with every wave, pliable, yet firm nonetheless.

If the fresh arrival surprised the sprite, she didn't show it. In fact, the brunette not only crawled to her, but straddled over the top as if to reach for her feet, and as she did so, the raven-haired goddess placed her hands upon her companion's hips and pulled them close to meet her mouth.

The Mariner couldn't believe what he was seeing. Two beautiful women, just a short jump away, one performing oral sex upon the other. And she was doing so with feverish intensity; her hands were upon the other's buttocks, pulling them down and apart, giving her as much access as possible to her lover's sex.

The Mariner felt like a spy, an interloper, a peeping-tom. Neither women had acknowledged his presence. Were they trying to shut him out? Was that it? Was that his punishment for not joining them?

The brunette's jaw dropped down in a silent cry, smiling, though not at him, her gaze was out across the ocean, but it dared him to join them nonetheless.

It was then he realised why she didn't appear so real. The brunette was lacking detail. While the first woman was as real as any he'd met in his lifetime (though admittedly none so well proportioned) the brunette was missing the finer characteristics. He squinted, trying to discern some tiny element, such as a solitary hair or freckle. He saw none. It was as if she were a very lifelike manikin whose creator had gotten lazy, knowing no-one would ever take a close up look.

Still grinning, the brunette lowered her body until it were fully on top of the raven's, putting her own face between her lover's legs, mirroring the actions of the other. They pleased with their tongues, bodies writhing, breasts pushed against each other's bellies.

The Mariner wanted them so much he was shaking, tremors running up and down his body. Struggling free from his clothes, the cold wind bit at his flesh, yet his groin was hot. On fire! His cock sprung free, eager and foolhardy.

A rope ladder was curled up by the railing. He hoisted it over and its bottom rung plummeted into the sea. Keeping his eye firmly on the women below, he skipped over and began his descent, as naked as his temptresses. Knees bashed against the hull as the ship rocked, but he did not care. The pain was far removed from his mind. All he could comprehend were their gasps; the way the brunette's body moved like a wave grinding against her partner, the sight of the raven's face, eagerly working between the thighs of the other woman. Soon the three of them would be together. They would see him, touch him, welcome him between them

and make love under the stars, mocking the sea for ever daring to defy them.

He was close to the surface now. If he threw himself away from the boat, they could be close enough to touch. Water, broken by collision with the hull, soaked his flesh, and for a moment he paused, afraid that if he lowered himself any further he could become lost in the depths. To reassure himself he looked over his shoulder to view the women once more and see that the surface of the ocean was strong.

It held their weight, surely it should hold his?

The brunette had propped herself up whilst still enjoying the attention performed below. Steadying herself with one arm, she used the other to part her lover's legs further, drawing her knees up to allow greater access. Up and down, the brunette slid her finger along her lover's lips, drawing moisture. The Mariner watched in fascination, fingers numb, limbs gone blue. And with a sigh from all parties, she slid her finger down between the cleft of her partner's buttocks.

Not being able to see the penetration he imagined, spurred the Mariner on. Regardless of any danger, he had to have them.

He reached the bottom rung and placed a foot into the ocean. The icy world upon which he travelled but never entered, reared up to claim him, passing above his ankle and scaling his shin. He was not deterred, his feet were already numb from the cold, and discomfort was far from his mind.

The pain, moments later, penetrated that numbness. It all happened within the space of a second or so. Almost the very instant he placed his feet into the water, the women, just as the previous night, lost all form, and fell into the sea.

The splash drenched the Mariner, who felt such frustration he screamed, his hoarse voice carrying across the waves. They were gone, his promised lovers, reclaimed as if they'd never existed at all.

His scream died as it birthed. A sudden sharp, violent pain that erupted around his submerged foot, cutting off sound, paralysing his voice box, leaving him expelling air from his lungs in a silent hiss. He lifted it from the dark water, afraid and confused.

He was bleeding, blood issuing from a wound in his lower-calf.

Something had bitten him.

Suddenly realising his vulnerability, naked, hanging off the side of a boat in a gathering storm, blood freely flowing into the water inches below, the Mariner began to panic. Just what the fuck was happening?

Before he could move, however, he saw his attacker, the beast that had tasted his flesh. It rose out of the depths, a huge eel, flesh brown and gnarled. Its head was at least eight inches wide, and its mouth opened revealing lines of sharp, bacteria-laced, yellow teeth. The creature's sickly flesh reminded the Mariner of a moray eel, but he'd never seen one in open water like this. Nor one so bold in its attack.

He pulled his legs up, knees reaching his chin. The jaws of the sea serpent snapped at the space below, far louder than the crashing of the waves beneath the hull. Having missed its prey, the eel fell gracefully back into the water, presumably to gather its strength for a second attempt.

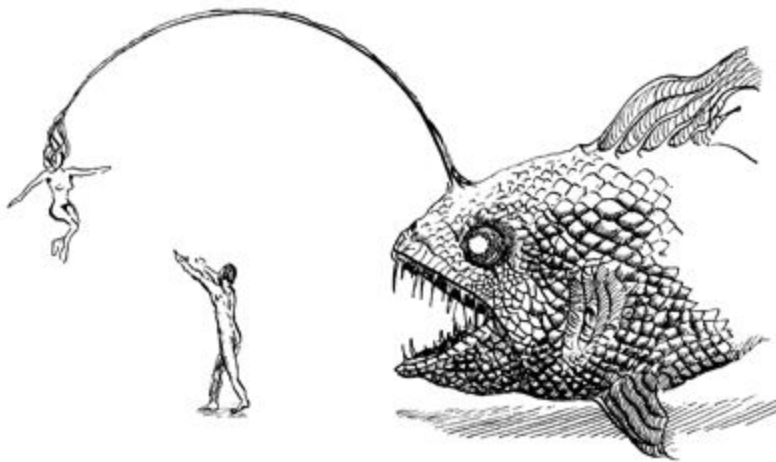
With tearing of muscles and quaking limbs he hauled himself up by the arms; legs useless to his endeavour. He refused to look back, not even when he heard another splash from below.

With little grace, the Mariner pulled himself onto the decking, hitting his chin upon the boards. There he lay, blood leaking from his wound and from his mouth.

The leg would need treating, but he had no energy to tackle it. Breaths entered and escaped his lungs in great haggard gasps whilst his body shook from the bitter cold.

The women had been created by the eel. He had no doubt about that. They'd been given substance to lure him down, and then dropped like a puppet show when it went for the kill. How had he been so stupid? To be lured down by such an obvious fantasy?

He would have to be on his guard from now on. The *eel* was fishing for *him*.



ABSINTH ALCOTT SQUATTED ON THE filthy carpet and rolled himself a cigarette. He had no food, he had no ship – he *certainly* had no soap, but tobacco was one thing he had a lot of. Buckets and buckets of the stuff; enough glorious tar to fill his lungs and then coat a roof. What he didn't have (more pressing than the soap situation) was a crew. They had all died in the latest raid - hence why Absinth had so much tobacco all to himself. He rooted through a bag by his side, allowing himself to be picky, choosing only the choicest pinches of the herb. Indulgence in tobacco was a sin he could easily allow, the skins would run out much sooner. After that, a pipe would suffice.

Despite his age, Absinth squatted with ease. His legs were trim and his back strong. Would he have been in such good shape if the world hadn't changed? If he hadn't been forced to fight to survive? He doubted it. Yet while his hair had deserted him, muscles had emerged, growing stronger with every passing year. In the future they would dwindle, a long and inevitable slide into frailty, but for now that day had yet to come. Sometimes he would marvel at his thin and gangly arms (a trait he could never shake off), sticks now bestowed with small yet firm muscles lined with bulging veins. Certainly a lot better than the weak flab of his youth. And a hell of a lot better than the paunch of middle-age.

He'd been in his room for some time, wondering how long Isabel would be with this new fella, the one she'd found wandering about on the pier. Once she'd led him back to their dilapidated house, keeping him distracted from the old man's presence, Absinth had taken the liberty of exploring the stranger's ship. It was old, startlingly so, practically a nautical antique. But it would do.

The main problem was not the age, but the sheer size of it! That made Absinth nervous. No way could it be sailed by just one man. Yet where was this fella's crew?

The house had been quiet for some time. At first, as he'd crept back inside, he'd heard them. Isabel's typical moans and cries, underlined by the stranger's grunts. That had finished ages ago. The poor sap would be dead by now, sent from sleep to death with a smile round his throat. Absinth couldn't blame him, if Isabel ever offered him her bed he'd take it, despite knowing the lethal consequences. Young pussy was too good an opportunity to pass.

But Absinth was suspicious by nature, and Isabel, sensing his distrust, hadn't risked seduction. Instead the black widow tolerated the presence of the wolf; they preyed upon different beasts so could share the same lair. More than once, he'd tried to understand her motives. Absinth was a 'tax and spend' kind of guy. For instance, he'd 'taxed' those people in Sighisoara tobacco for the right to live, and now he was going to 'spend' it. Isabel didn't dabble in the spending side. She claimed to be saving for some sort of religious pilgrimage, confirming in the old man's mind that she was completely bonkers. The world had fallen apart, there was no Pope.

Absinth lit his cigarette in the fire, the flames singeing his hairy knuckles. Black soot had long ago blotted out any design on the wallpaper, though Absinth didn't mind. This was a place to rest and recuperate. A place to smoke and plot. Nothing more.

Steps. Down the stairs. Isabel must have finished going through the man's pockets. Yet why were the footsteps so heavy and slow?

“Isabel? Hear any sweet nothings?” he shouted above the crackling fire. “Like, where his *fucking* crew are? I need them.”

But it was not the Widow who walked into the room, she was limp in her killer’s arms.

Through the smoke, the two seamen appraised each other. The Mariner, bathed yet always filthy, lank hair thick from sea salt and grime. Absinth, gnarled by years and sinewy from toil.

He looked at Isabel and noted remotely that the blood that covered her face clashed with her copper hair. Still, a fashion faux pax was the least of her trouble. She was dead.

“How did it happen?” he asked, curiosity in place of emotion.

The Mariner didn’t respond, didn’t even seem to hear. He stumbled across the room as if in a daze, and lowered the body beside the fire.

Poor Isabel. Still, the bitch had it coming, no doubt about it. How many had she lured to death in that room? Absinth had no idea, she’d been doing it long before he’d met her. Inevitable that one day she’d find someone too quick to cut, or too messed up to spunk ‘n’ sleep.

“You saw her go for the knife huh?”

“What?”

“I asked if she went for her knife?”

The Mariner struggled as if the memory were a wet fish. “No knife. We were making love. And..”

“Yes?” Absinth thought his own voice sounded rather too keen for his ears. Perhaps he should try to sound more sympathetic? Would be difficult though. Why should he care about a whore’s death? Lord knows another death meant little in this place.

“I killed her.” The Mariner stared at a bloody knuckle as if he’d never seen his own fists before. He repeated it again. He’d killed her.

“By accident?”

“No. I just...” the Mariner struggled to find words. “One moment everything was fine. The next... Blood everywhere. I couldn’t help it.”

A sexual nutbag, thought Absinth. Jeeesus Christ Almighty! He probably came as he did it too, bloody freak.

“Easily done,” he said, offering his cigarette to the Mariner. “I once smacked a girl in the cunt after shagging ‘er. Don’t know why, just did. I’d pulled out and was getting dressed when I saw my jizz in ‘er fanny. It was trickling out, no, *gushing* out, and for some reason I just lost it. Punched her right between the legs. Was like punching moss. Didn’t go as far as you though, back in those days there were consequences. Not like now.”

“What’s beaver?”

Absinth blinked, trying to keep up with this man’s insanities.

“You think we should eat them?”

Absinth finally realized what the Mariner was getting at. About his triangular chest clung a tattered tee-shirt proclaiming to the world, ‘Save Trees, Eat Beaver’, the words

peppered with tiny burnt holes like machine gun fire. "It's just a fuckin' tee-shirt."

"Oh."

"So where did you get the Neptune?"

"The Neptune?"

"Yes, your ship!" Absinth cried, his excitement bubbling over.

"I didn't know she was called the Neptune."

Absinth couldn't conceal his amazement. "You mean you've been sailing an antique, a piece of history, and you didn't know?"

The Mariner shook his head, clearly he didn't.

"That's the Neptune. Took convicts to Australia. Must have been around 1780 it all happened."

"I don't know where those places are. Did it succeed?"

"In a way. Over a hundred and fifty convicts died on the journey. Terrible what the crew did to 'em. Terrible. I read about it when tracing back my family-tree." He focused the Mariner with a wily stare. "A lot of bad memories aboard that vessel, I'll bet."

"No, no memories."

A blank book this one. Nothing inside that head but a desire to cum and make girls bleed. Useful.

"My name is Absinth Alcott, and like you I'm a sailor. A captain when the mood takes me. What's yours?"

"I don't have a name."

"Bloody hell. Done something even worse than killing this honey here? Ok, we'll play it your way. Your name will be..." Absinth struggled, searching his memory banks. He snapped his fingers. "Claude! Pleased to meet you, Claude."

Between them, a fly made a daring dive for Isabel's corpse, only to be repelled by smoke. It banked, hoping to bring itself around for a second go.

"So where to next, Claude? To which horizon will you be sailing?"

The Mariner, still in shock, tried to assess the old man. He liked him, despite his vile nicotine stained hands and teeth, despite his frank talk of previous thuggery. The Mariner couldn't bring himself to cast judgement, hadn't he just killed a woman in cold blood? Didn't he have demons of his own?

He leaned forward, deciding to put his trust in Absinth. "I'm searching for an island. It's protected, ringed by defences. Somewhere on that island is the truth. The truth to why the world's falling apart, the secrets that we have all forgotten."

"An Oracle?"

"I suppose it could be. I don't know myself, I just know the answers are to be found there."

"Contained within an island?"

"Yes, the island is 'protected'. Whatever that means."

The Mariner passed back the cigarette, which Absinth toked deep upon, trying to hide his racing mind and soaring

excitement. "How do you know all this?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just... do."

Absinth threw the butt into the fire and clapped his hands. His agitated guest recoiled as if struck. "Well isn't this a turn up for the books?"

"What is?"

"Over the past year I've been speaking to sailors, not like yourself, these were pirates and all sorts of scum-bags. Time and again I would hear a rumour. Sometimes it got silly, the usual storyteller fluff, but ultimately the same core facts again an' again. An island, ringed by coral, upon which a woman lives. A woman who knows *everything*."

"Everything?"

"That's what I said, yeah! Everything! An Oracle!"

All uncertainty, shock and vulnerability fell from the Mariner in that moment. So much so it scared Absinth a little.

"Where?"

"East of here," Absinth babbled. "Somewhere east. I don't know. You have to keep going. It's a long voyage."

"Then I must begin now." The Mariner stood, gathering purpose.

"Wait! Where are your crew?"

The Mariner's paused, confused at the suggestion. "I don't have a crew. Well, just one, she's outside." Having remembered his ward, he called for her.

“Only one crew member?” Absinth was amazed. That couldn’t be true! How on earth did he sail such an enormous ship? “Then I should come with you. I’m good at putting a crew together. Several places to recruit from. You supply the ship, I’ll supply the men. How does that sound?”

“I’d be glad,” the Mariner lied, thinking to himself that he’d rather have no more crew than two. A soft pattering of feet announced their third. “I want you to meet my friend. Grace.”

The devil edged in, looking about the room for a possible trap. Her snout was doing the most work and she let out a snarl when she found the old man’s scent,

Absinth leaped to his feet with a jolt, backing away.

“What the fuck is that?”

“Isabel said she’s a tazzy devil.”

“I can see it’s a Tasmanian devil, I mean what the fuck’s it doin’ here?”

The Mariner looked from devil to the man and back again. “I told you. She’s my crew.”

Absinth shook his head. “I’m not boarding your ship with one of those things. Can’t fucking stand dogs. Leave it ‘ere.”

Grace’s brown eyes turned up as if to ask the Mariner if he were considering such an outrageous notion. Her front paws fidgeted in the gloom.

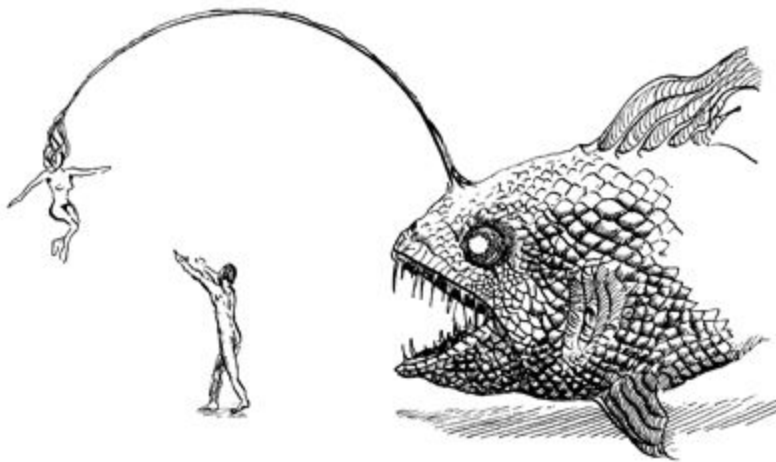
“I’m sorry, Mr. Alcott. Her place is not up for negotiation.”

Absinth's face turned to a snarl. The change was bestial in its ferocity. "What the fuck's wrong with you? You prick! You tellin' me that fuckin' rat is better than me?" Even accounting for the orange glare of the flames, the old man's cheeks had gone bright red from humiliated rage.

"No. But she was first."

"Get the fuck out of here, you murderer!" Absinth tensed as if ready for a fight. "You're not welcome. Not you, not your rat, nor your fuckin' ship neither!"

The Mariner didn't need to be told twice, he had no stomach for a second death that night. He left, and the further they got from the wolf and widow's house, the happier Grace became.



5 THE THIRD NIGHT OF OUR TALE

THE MARINER SCREAMED AND TORE at his ears, and yet still the visions remained. The ship, the 'Neptune', as it had been named many long years before, screamed too, though her

complaints were for the ferocious winds that tore at her frame, and the staggering waves that clashed at her hull.

The day had been spent in preparation. First job had been to tend to his wound. The row of punctures created by the eel's teeth were each individually deep, yet by a stroke of luck the creature had failed to tear out a larger piece. The Mariner found some old, damp bandages in a cupboard below deck, and rapped them as tightly as he could to stop the bleeding. Infection was his main concern. The whole region throbbed and grew increasingly maroon. What sorts of diseases did eels carry? What sort of poisons could they secrete?

Once he'd stopped the bleeding he attended to the ship, preparing it for the imminent storm. He bolted hatches and reinforced sails. He put everything not nailed down below deck, and yet still he was afraid. They were a long way from land. How long had it been since he'd bid farewell to Absinth and sailed East? Countless days. Endless nights.

Finally, absolutely sure he'd done his best to prepare the Neptune, he'd sat down on the floor and masturbated. Conjuring the sights of the previous evenings, it was easy to achieve an erection, though knowing an eel was behind what he'd seen made him feel nauseous. He sat there, feeling so sick he could throw up, yet so aroused he couldn't help but rub vigorously, replaying the previous night's events in his head, and hating himself every moment.

Tonight the eel would return and he had to be as best prepared as he could. To resist, he had to reduce his libido.

He ejaculated. A grim grunt and a spurt and then all the shame he could handle. Despite this, and the soreness in his flaccid penis, he began again. Just to make sure.

But all the preparation had been in vain. As soon as the sun dimmed, not just one, but many arrived. A whole shoal, eager for food, eager for meat, a whole army whose powers meant that the women from the night before were not alone. Tonight there were hundreds.

On all sides, as the Neptune carved a path through the waves, gathered an enormous sexual congregation. Each meagre defence he'd erected was crushed beneath the illusion's awesome weight. As far as the eye could see were scenes of erotic excess. On one side, three nubile women cavorted, each naked to his eye. On another, two more undressed slowly, trying to tease with every movement of fabric.

It were not just women conjured from the waves. Statuesque males, bodies toned and mighty, penises long and firm, grappled with their concubines. They did not seem threatened by the Mariner's presence. They too refused to look his way.

All about the Mariner were offered orifices, scenes so tempting that not even the most devout holy-man could resist. Yet between the bodies and the ship, and in the brief gaps between them, the Mariner could spot hundreds of eels, all fighting amongst themselves for a close position, all determined to be the first one to taste the flesh of the deluded human. It were as if he'd already flung himself overboard, such were their frantic jostling. Yet their eyes remained glazed and cold. Glass eyes. The water churned with oily brown bodies as they slipped against each other, jaws snapping at air.

And yet he could not watch their horror for long, soon his attention would be drawn back to the sights they promised, all in exchange for the paltry price of his meat and bones.

All ages of eel must have gathered tonight as their skills varied widely. Some sprites were remarkably realistic, others were almost cartoonish in their simplicity, containing next to no detail except upon sexual organs. Some sprites, whilst realistically designed, lacked any beauty at all, and moved with a false jerking motion, utterly bereft of eroticism. It were as if each eel were competing, trying to lure him in their direction. In some regions, whole groups of sprites were controlled by the same eel, and these performed grand orgies providing the most alluring sights of all.

Yet in the distance, each eel desperate to exploit any possible sexual niche or kink their quarry might possess, extreme acts were conjured. Acts of sexual brutality, acts of sadism and humiliation. Nipples were clamped, throats choked, backs whipped and thighs burnt. Were these just for him? Would it be the same if another were aboard this ship in his place? Or would the fantasies created be utterly different?

Could these creatures see into his soul?

The Mariner strained his eyes looking into the gloom, trying to discern one body from another, leaning further out over the choppy waves.

He saw several men, roughly sharing a red-headed woman. She struggled and fought against her assailants, but their blows were the stronger. Beaten, she was forced onto her knees and took one into her mouth, whilst a second planted his hands upon her hips and entered from behind. She seemed resigned to the rough intrusion, rocking herself backwards and forwards and grasping the hilt of the penis in front for more effective manoeuvring. The third man looked on, slapping her breasts whilst he touched himself.

The Mariner could join them, abuse her in any way he want, if only he stepped off the boat.

He saw a group of women, powerful and united, strolling amongst the scenes as a shark would glide through shoals. As if by random they'd select victims, hauling them away from their current activities, and drag them back to the group. There they'd set upon them. Currently they had a man tied face down, arms and legs spread wide with ropes. His struggles were of no use. They laughed and taunted as one of their number donned a large strap-on phallus. He screamed with pain and humiliation-infused pleasure, as she thrust deep into his behind.

The Mariner could join them, give himself up to their sensual strength, if only he climb down the ladder.

He looked upon the two he'd seen the previous night. As if committed lovers they were once again entwined, the lesser detailed brunette on her back, the raven lying between her legs performing cunnilingus for their ignored voyeur. A man emerged from the water and mounted his original temptress, pushing his cock inside her from behind, his crotch slapping against her rump, juddering with every thrust. She did not remove her mouth, but proceeded to moan against her lover's sex.

The Mariner could join them, live out any wet dream, be it juvenile, kinky or sinister, if only he put a foot into the water.

"No more!" he screamed and threw himself away from the view, stumbling onto his back, prone upon the decking. His groin throbbed. The earlier administrations performed upon his penis had done little good, the soreness only made him feel even more desperate for release.

The Mariner pulled his trousers down to his knees, expecting to find blood, his cock was so engorged. About him drops of rain began to fall, blown in sideways into his eyes. "No more," he repeated to himself, shutting his eyes tight and clamping hands over his ears.

But they did not abate. The eels were hungry. Very little came through these waters, food was scarce, and competition fierce. The scenes about the Neptune continued, growing ever more extravagant, ever more extreme, whilst their prey wailed and cried.

The empty bottle of his last store of wine rolled about the deck. He'd drank it quickly in huge gulps, trying at once to abate his addiction and dull the arousal he felt. It had done no good, all it had achieved was to weaken his mind further, dissolving any resolve he could muster.

Desperate not to be lured to his death, the Mariner staggered to his feet. His movement was hampered by his trousers gathered around his ankles and rather than struggle with them over his erection, he kicked them off. Freezing cold and dangerously aroused he made his way to the door that lead below.

He knew that there was no point hiding. Their gasps and moans could not be ignored. No. He would use the door for something else.

The scenes outside were reaching fever pitch. He watched them, one hand steadying himself against the door, the other one rubbing furiously at his genitalia. Vomit surged up his throat, the wine rejected by self-loathing. And yet, as it seeped down his chin and splattered on his hands and feet, he still masturbated. Still he watched.

"No more."

In the distance, the three men, eager to use the red-head in any way they wished, grew more violent, punching and kicking her, before once more inserting their cocks into whatever hole they chose. The Mariner wanted to stop them, to free the woman, to protect and preserve her dignity. But more so, he wanted to join them in defiling her, wanted to become a beast like them, a member of the pack falling upon their prey. He hated them, but was he not worse? For watching and enjoying?

The Mariner unsecured and pulled open the enormous slab of oak. It swayed heavily in his hand, its momentum uncertain with every wave the Neptune passed over. Overhead, lightning flashed, lighting up the orgy, searing images into his brain.

The woman using the strap-on upon her slave laughed at his attempts to pull free and slapped and pulled at his head for the enjoyment of the mocking audience. As if to prove the effectiveness of the torture, she reached beneath him, presenting for all the evidence of his arousal. The Mariner watched, wanting to feel pity, but instead drunk with envy.

“NO-”

The man who'd intruded upon the lesbian couple, turning it into a 'ménage à trois', put his hands around his lover's neck, and tightened his grip.

“-MORE!”

The Mariner gripped the door in one hand, and positioned his genitals between it and the frame with the other, still unable to look away, still sick with his own urges.

Somewhere, amongst all the moans, screams and gasps, he heard the sound of Isabel, choking on blood and broken

teeth.

Screaming, he swung the door shut-

The redhead, face bloody and bruised, pulled her ass-cheeks aside for the next intrusion-

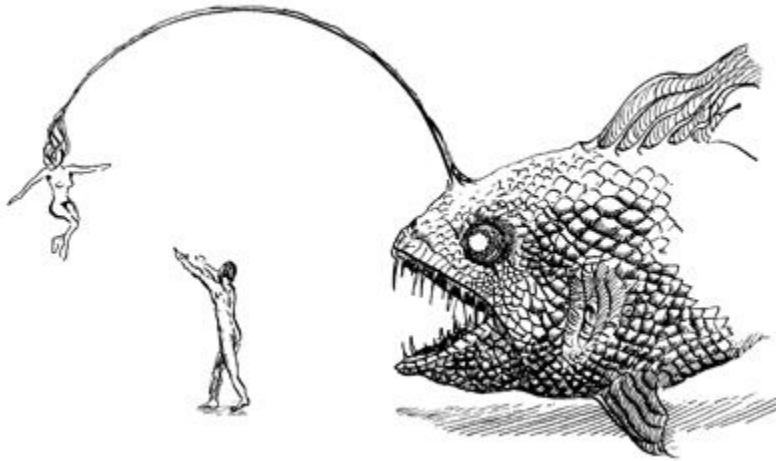
To the audiences delight, the slave-man gave up fighting and began bucking back against his violator-

Despite her asphyxiation, the dark haired lover turned her head to the side, giving a better view of her partner's cunt-

- and the door clamped down hard on his penis, oak tearing flesh and crushing muscle, agony erupting up through every inch of his body.

He fell back, legs unable to offer support. His mangled genitals, red and swelling, leaked blood, small pools running in tiny rivulets along his thighs. A hollow chill ran up his abdomen.

The pain was not kind enough to bring unconsciousness, but it was cruel enough to bring paralysis. He lay there, unable to move, and stared into the sky. He screamed and cried, but between sobs he also laughed; neither the eels nor his demons would get him tonight.



6

BEFORE, ROTTEN PHILOSOPHY

AFTER LEAVING THE TINY ISLAND of Brighton, the Mariner had only seen one piece of land and that was a small rock jutting out the water, two days after setting sail. It was small, a ball of snot compared to the Neptune. In the thick fog, it could easily have been missed.

Fortunate it was then, that the Mariner was sitting starboard, legs dangling over the side, drinking from a recently scavenged bottle of wine. He was already inebriated; with each swig he took the journey from lap to mouth became clumsier, the glass tapping against his teeth that bit more forceful.

The rock appeared from the mists, and on top of the rock, the Philosopher. She was substantially older than he, a sexagenarian. Her clothing, utterly unsuitable for the sea, looked too colourful and soft. Impractical and vulnerable to the elements. That was not the worst of her worries though; she was chained to the stone.

The pair watched each other as the Neptune glided closer. Eye contact was made way before either attempted to speak. Both sets were full of sorrow, his drunk with wine, hers drunk with hunger.

She lifted a weary hand, shaking from the weight of the chains wrapped about it. He nodded his head in reply.

“There’s nothing out there, you know!” she called to him a motherly tone, though her exhaustion was plain.

“How do you know that?” The two were close enough to talk, the Neptune slowing down on its own accord as if intent on the exchange.

“We tried sailing that way before and had to turn back. Just open water. No fish, no birds. No food. You don’t want to try it.”

“Who are you? What did you do to be tied to that rock?”

The woman scrunched up her face, wrinkles folding over one another in disgust, “I didn’t do anything to deserve this, they just put me here.” She looked as if she’d been left standing in the rain, rather than deserted on a rock to starve. She smiled, trying to put on a brave face for company. “My name is Gloria. I teach Philosophy. What’s your name young man?”

“I don’t have a name.”

This did not meet the same distrust he usually received. “Very well, in absence of a mother, I shall name you..” she rolled her eyes upwards, scanning the heavens for inspiration. “Edward. That’s a handsome name. Noble, yet dashing.”

"Thank you," said the newly named Edward.

"You are most welcome."

"What is 'Philosophy'?"

"Good question! Probably the first that I ask my students, and often they are still pondering it when they finish the course! It is the study of knowledge, of how to think, how to live. It's the oldest of all teachings." She saw that he looked blank so pressed on. "For instance, we look at Plato, and his belief in Forms. He believed in perfect metaphysical entities from which we share properties; for instance a painting can be beautiful, but it is not the definition of beauty. So beauty must be something else - a *metaphysical Form*."

The two were getting close now, only eight feet or so between them. Upon closer inspection the Mariner could see just how frail and thin the old woman was, and her clothes, whilst bright, were tattered.

She continued her lecture. "Let me see, who else do we cover? There's John Stuart Mills. Nietzsche. We also look at Rene Descartes - *wazza drunkenfart* - and his views on mind-body dualism."

The interruption was so quick it could easily have been missed. The words flew out the side of her mouth like a tick or spasm, the eager syllables jostling her head to the side as they escaped. Afterwards she continued as if nothing had happened, but the Mariner had noticed, and now he was staring at the scratches that ran up the side of her neck. And the blood caked about her ears.

"Classical philosophy is, in my view, the best part of the syllabus. We look at the three greats, Plato, Eric Idle, and Aristotle - *aristotle wazza bugga forthe-*"

The last word seemed to get jammed in her throat. Her eyes rolled into her head as she choked, her body jerking. Hands, tense and claw-like, reached up and began scratching at her head. The Mariner's bowels froze as the woman let out a strange growling somewhere deep in her throat. Like an abused dog her face contorted, lips pulled back over ancient brown teeth.

Suddenly her eyes flicked down from inside her skull and focused on the Mariner. She screamed, and flung forward, hands outstretched and claspings, spitting and shrieking. The chains held her in place, pulling back like a leash. His heart sank as he recognized what she was: one of the Mindless. The state was all too common; he'd slain several of her kind. None quite like this though, usually a person either had a mind or they didn't, not a strange in-between. He was thankful for the chains. The Mindless wanted nothing but to kill those who still had thoughts, and claw open their heads to get at them.

Suddenly the murderous fury drained out of her, and she was sweet old Gloria once more.

"Bottle!" she cried, as if she'd answered a riddle. "How silly of me, it's Philosophy one-oh-one! Aristotle was a bugger for the bottle! Monty Python said that before he was put to death for teaching philosophy in ancient Greece." She smiled at him, seeming not to notice his revulsion. "You see, being a lover of knowledge is dangerous business. You have to contend with religion for one thing. The clever ones worked it into their writings, included God whenever they could. That way they would be free from *unwarranted* persecution."

She stopped, all calm and chattiness falling from her, revealing a sad and hungry wretch. A lonely woman,

starving and afraid. "Are you going to save me?"

The Mariner wanted to take another drink from the bottle, but thought that cruel. Instead he let it sit loosely in his lap, but it called to him, using his guilt as a megaphone. "No," he said.

"Why not? I'll die out here."

"If I rescue you, I'd kill you."

Once again her body shuddered, but not from a fit like before. This time it was from tears.

"I'm scared. I don't know why the world is like this! I can't remember *anything*. It's all just... blank. All I can remember is the philosophy. Not the classes, not the school, not how I came to be here. I don't remember any of it!"

And at that, the Mariner felt a cold pang deep in his heart. Like him, she didn't remember things. Had whatever happened to her, happened to him?

"I don't know how I got here either."

"Then let me aboard!" she wailed. "We can work it out together, you and I. Edward? Please?"

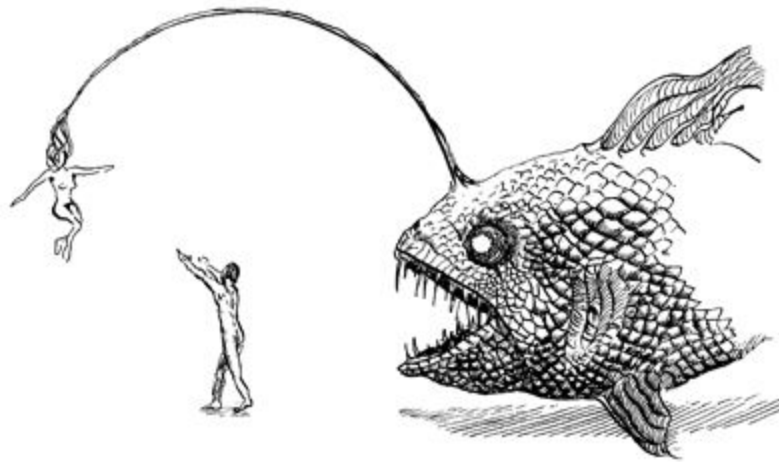
There wasn't a chance. She was Mindless, albeit a part-time one. The question was, what was he?

"I'm sorry Gloria." He had passed her now. Neptune had sensed the interlude was over and was picking up speed.

"Please?"

"Everything's gonna be alright. Think about your philosophy!" he shouted back. "It will sustain you." Lies of

course. He was hoping he could trigger her fit once more. It would be easy to sail away from the snarling hateful creature she'd momentarily become. Far harder, as he did now, to leave an old lady alone, no thoughts in her head but that of a rotten philosophy, crying in the mist.



7 OUT OF NIGHT AND INTO DAWN

BALLS SWOLLEN AND LEG INFECTED, the Mariner remained alive. After mutilating his arousal, the temptations had continued, but with little potency. Bloody testicles make it difficult to notice anything. Sometime between the nut-cracking and dawn the eels had left, returning hungry and disappointed to wherever it is that eels rest.

As if sharing in their disappointment, the storm too had abated, gone elsewhere to find some other poor wretch to torment. All was quiet, except Grace who scampered about him as if nothing had happened. She'd emerged from below, bleary eyed and yawning.

"How the fuck did you sleep through that?"

You brought this on yourself, her eyes seemed to reply. *Pssh! Men!*

“Aye, I know. Stupid. Stupid.” Movement was difficult but he managed to pull himself to his feet. She barked in encouragement and hopped from paw to paw; a tiny personal trainer showing tough love.

“Remind me to yell at you next time you’ve just given birth to another batch of bastards.”

“Arf!”

“Arf, yourself.”

And then he heard the sound that had roused the Tasmanian devil. It spoke to his heart as it had to her stomach. The cries of a seagull. Land!

Taking care not to graze his swollen testicles, he shuffled starboard for a closer inspection. Before them was a large island, tall cliffs rose out the water, sheer and commanding, dark stone casting its shadow across the water. Only one point seemed to offer access, a thin gorge packed with dense trees. Circling above were countless birds, more than a normal sky-scape worth; something must have disturbed them.

Yet the Mariner’s focus wasn’t drawn to the birds in the sky, nor the cliffs on the shore, but to the shallow waters before it. Another boat bobbed silently in the waves. It was smaller than his, anchored closer to the island than the Neptune could ever hope to get. Small, yet its sleek white exterior looked capable of great speed. Once again, the Mariner was reminded that he sailed a crumbling geriatric.

Other people had found his island.

The Mariner retrieved a gun, loaded and ready for use. A Mauser; an odd looking boxy weapon with a long thin snout like an echidna's. He had a crate of them, lined up and protected with straw.

Grace herself had hopped upon a barrel and was sniffing at the air excitedly, great globs of drool hanging from her jaw at the prospect of land.

"How about we leave the young'uns here and go for a looksie?" Grace didn't object.

He lowered a row-boat. Grace clutched to his shoulder in an ungainly manner whilst he climbed down the rope-ladder, wincing with every step. Each moment of friction between his legs caused pain to rupture out to all four corners of his body. Not a good day to be going up against pirates. Still, no use moaning, there was no-one to listen.

The white ship seemed quiet, its crew already disembarked and searching for his prize. He rowed past it, keeping a wary eye for gunners, although he couldn't spot a single cannon.

Near the shore were six yellow barrels bobbing in the water. As the waves hit them they didn't shift position, rather they were anchored to the spot, trapped in perpetual surf.

Elsewhere all was calm, the birds circling the gorge were settling somewhat, their cries a distant warning of intrusion. He rowed as fast as he could, eager to catch up to the interlopers and see they not squander the answers promised to him alone.

Promised by whom? He shook his head, dismissing the unwanted query.

The first of the yellow barrels drew near. He was correct, it was secured in place, anchored to the seabed below, a chain disappearing into the murky depths. The barrel itself was rather nondescript. Its casing was made of thick plastic, with no markings to be seen. The Mariner warily nudged it with his oar. Nothing.

He rowed on, eager to reach the shoreline. Grace was equally excited, she dashed up and down the short boat, barking at the birds in the sky.

Suddenly there was a splintering crack, and the boat lurched to a halt. Thrown forward, the Mariner's legs were pushed together upon his swollen testicles, the dull throb once again promoted to an agonizing wail. He screamed through gritted teeth.

The front of the boat was coming apart, water pouring in through the gaps as the wood contorted, behaving more like brittle dry twigs than sturdy oak. The Mariner swore and tried to steady the vessel, but it was no use. Something had the boat in its grip and wasn't letting go. Grace backed away as far as she could, but the water was swiftly flowing over her paws.

The shoreline was still at a fair distance. Fuck it. They would have to swim. No other choice. Hopefully, whatever creature was attacking them, it would be too preoccupied with chewing the boat.

Picking up the trembling devil, he told her not to worry. "Just a quick swim, nothing to be concerned about." He hoped he managed to keep his voice calm and that the small animal would garner some small solace from his tone, but by her trembling he feared the words had been wasted.

He jumped, plummeting into the waters, head submerged in an instant. Cold seawater rushed into his nose

And he opened his eyes.

It was not a beast attacking his boat. The rapidly shrinking remains were being torn to pieces by a great wall of coral, its rough and spiky form shifting as it moved to consume the wooden frame. How did it move? He couldn't see, great clouds of sand bloomed about each movement, creating an impenetrable shroud, obscuring detail.

The still parts of the coral reef told the full story. It were made of sunken ships and drowned sailors. Masts jutted from between sea urchins, sponges grew on ancient rudders. All torn to pieces and held in place whilst the organism expanded through them, using their strength to fuel its own. If coral reefs were made up of the dead of the sea, then this reef was *undead*, a moving defence. Ruthless. Pitiless.

Human bones shone in the peculiar underwater twilight, a sign of how many had perished along this slip of coast. His eyes passed over these details quickly, focusing upon another.

Amongst the coral were *fresh* corpses. Held in place were men whose last breaths couldn't have been long before, their eyes wide and unfocused, mouths hung ajar as if still hoping for that last life giving gasp. Fish swarmed about them, nibbling at the gashes in their flesh, skin torn open by sharp shells.

Suppressing his own scream, the Mariner resurfaced. Could they swim back to the Neptune? Too little strength. Besides, there was a growing cloud of blood around his leg and crotch.

Sharks!

He couldn't see fins yet. Perhaps even they were afraid of the monstrous coral?

Grace was equally distraught, her front paws paddled frantically in the water, trying to stay afloat. She seemed to have sensed their danger and cleverly stuck by the Mariner, refusing to make a reckless (and no doubt fatal) dash for the land.

Then he realized what the barrels were for. They were markers, put in place by the pirates before him to signify a safe route through the island's defence. The Mariner began a painfully slow swim towards the second of the yellow buoys, this one far to his right. Every few strokes he would have a quick look below the surface to make sure there was no coral nearby. There was, but not so close it could reach out for him. Grace followed in his wake, her eyes fixed on his back and unwavering.

They reached the second barrel, then the third and the fourth. Each one carved their route, zigzagging towards the shore. At every barrel they would stop, the Mariner putting one hand on the buoy and the other outstretched to support Grace. Together they'd rest, gathering strength for another swim. The path-makers must have employed a lot of 'trial and error' in finding this secret route, a lot of corpses were littered along the way. A lot of death to find the Oracle.

Such was the price of truth.

Gasping and exhausted, the pair reached the sandy shore, both with a similar expression despite the species divide. The Mariner staggered a few yards from the surf and sat with a thud, hands pulling open his trousers so he could inspect the state of his genitals. They were squashed, swollen and

red, but the breaks in the skin weren't as ruptured as they felt.

He dropped onto his back and stared at the sky.

They had made it.

Unlike her human counterpart, Grace had already forgotten the hardships of the swim to shore, and was harassing a large crab she thought looked like dinner. She'd dart towards it, snapping her jaws and barking, only to leap away when the crab clapped its claws. Both creatures repeated the process, locked in a dance.

The sun was harsh on his face, the cold he'd experienced out at sea long forgotten. He was in no rush to move, the sand felt great on his back and the pain between his legs deterred him from ever walking again. It was nice to simply lay and relish that after all this time, he'd finally found the island.

Dragged up onto the beach was a boat, large enough for ten and just as white and pristine as its larger sister out at sea. Where were its passengers? Probably up the gorge somewhere, disturbing those birds. He looked along the beach to either side, a thin strip of sand with cliff face on one side, water on the other.

No, not just that. There were two people. Running towards him.

The Mariner hastily struggled to his feet, clutching at his trousers, undone and bunching around his knees. He felt for his semi-automatic. Gone. Lost somewhere in the surf.

"Grace!" he cried, alarmed. She looked up from the crab, who took the opportunity to scuttle away to safety. She saw

the targets of his anxiety: two people sprinting as fast as their wasted limbs could carry them.

Mindless.

The Mariner knew he couldn't outrun them. They weren't the fastest of creatures, but he certainly wasn't going far with swollen testicles! His one chance was that the pirates would have left a gun in the small boat. Remote, but possible.

As the Mariner limped towards the vessel, Grace charged, snarling and shrieking her strange battle cry. The two were closer now, a man and a woman, both horribly emaciated, faces twisted into dumb hungry grimaces. Mindless had no concern for themselves, their well-being or whereabouts. All they cared for was tearing open the heads of those not like them. They understood nothing but their prey.

This were the reason the male Mindless did not see the Tazzy devil as she streaked towards him, and still did not register her presence nor the pain as she sank her teeth into his leg. He did, however, fall into the sand, clumps kicked up into the air as he continued to drag himself forward whilst Grace leaped onto his back and fastened her teeth into his neck.

The woman, however, was still unhindered, and closed the gap.

With a final burst of agonising speed, the Mariner reached the boat and looked inside.

Empty.

Shit.

He turned to face his attacker, her hands outstretched and gnarled, movements crooked and alien,

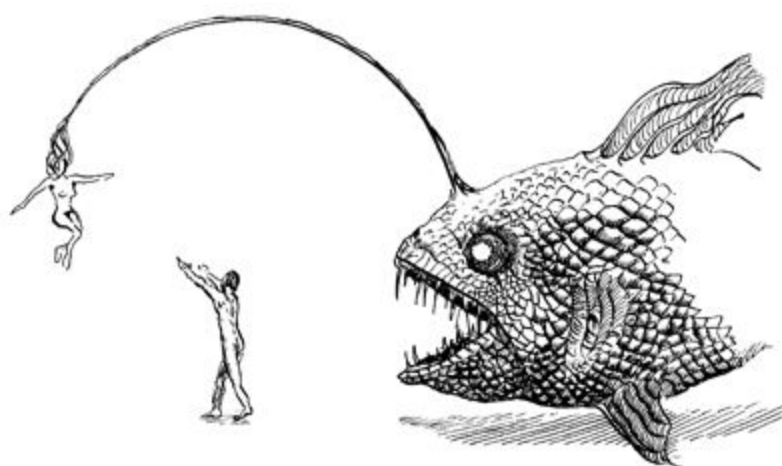
Three gunshots rang in quick succession. The second and third hit the woman in the side of her head, caving in one side, and exploding the other. She fell lifeless onto the sand, staining the gold a bright red, pieces of bone scattered around her deformed skull like confetti.

A few twitches and the fading echo of gunfire were all that remained.

“What a coincidence!” A familiar voice drifted through the tinnitus whine. “I was worried you would have gotten here ages ago. Either that or gotten yourself killed.”

The Mariner looked towards the trees, the direction of the voice. Absinth was there, looking pleased with himself, rifle held in his hands. He looked as tough and old as he had before, although now he wore a different tee-shirt, one with a topless girl swearing, gesturing hostility at the world.

He grinned at the stunned Mariner. “We’ve found that Oracle of yours.”



THE ASCENT PROVED STRENUOUS. IF Absinth had any sympathy for the Mariner, he didn't show it. He allowed him to stagger, often falling to the ground through fatigue. Not only was he suffering from the wounds he'd received, but he needed a drink. *Bad*. The wine seemed an age ago. An aeon. Couldn't Absinth see that?

But Absinth walked ahead in silence, leaving the Mariner to be flanked by the remainders of his crew, four in total.

Grace refused to follow and leave her prize only partially eaten, and the sight of her prompted one to ask if she were some kind of dog.

"She's a devil," he replied. They scoffed.

"Absinth, who is this bloke?" asked one. He was young chap with a big ball of brown curls for hair and nostrils that flared like the mouths of cannons. "An old friend of yours?"

"He doesn't have a name."

"Bullshit," muttered another. "His name's just rubbish, that's all. What do you think it is, Henry?"

The curly haired and big nosed gentleman laughed and thought about it. "Cuntface? I think his name's Cuntface."

The other sailor put a hand on the Mariner's shoulder. "Is that it? That your name?"

The Mariner sighed and kept his bleary eyes on the difficult path ahead. "Sure. Why not?"

"Fuck yeah, why not, ay Dan?" Henry laughed.

The steep climb wound its way through dense trees with steep stone on either side. A small stream ran down it, marking the route they should take. At the top the foliage broke into a clearing dominated by a wide tent. They had climbed a fair height; a dizzy spell congratulated their ascent, and looking back across the tree-tops they could see their two ships, tiny in the great expanse of ocean.

"Feel glad we walked back down for you," said Dan as he gathered his breath. "We saw your ship arrive and thought we better check you out. Lucky for you we did."

Finally Absinth turned his attention to the Mariner. "Listen Cuntface," he sneered. "This place is crawling with Mindless. We've had to shoot quite a few so far, you may have noticed their bodies as we climbed." The Mariner hadn't, he'd been thinking about wine. "They've killed a few of my friends, and we're not happy about that."

"It was fucking disgusting," said Henry. "Smashed Dee's head open with a rock and then smeared her brains over his face like it was a cream or somethin'."

Absinth didn't break his gaze from the Mariner. "Also, we lost quite a few to that coral down there. Nasty stuff. But I see you profited from our sacrifice. We don't mind that do we lads? What we do mind though, is you keeping any *secrets*. So I'll ask you, what do you know about this place? What do you know about that tent?"

The Mariner realized why he was alive. They didn't like him and didn't need him, but they were afraid.

"This is where the answers are. The truth. The lost pieces of our world."

"And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

He could reply with complete honesty. "I don't know. Why did *you* come here?"

Absinth didn't bother to answer, instead he turned his basset eyes towards the tent, its dark opening alluring and repellent in equal measure. "Get in there Dan, we'll follow. Cuntface can come in last with me."

More akin to a Bedouin canopy, the tent straddled the clearing, overlooking the bay. Bright colours and exotic patterns decorated the canopy. Fantastical beasts reared with menace, noble steeds galloped with pride, lands rose and fell across the wide tapestry. Told along its soft canvass was a whole multitude of stories; each creature and scene blended into the other, as if the embroider had no attention span and was constantly changing the subject of her art.

Dan moved the cloth aside, and stepped through. They heard a woman's voice, full of authority yet smooth and alluring. "Come inside Daniel Hughes, I am pleased you could come."

The rest of the group followed. Each entered, one after the other, until only Absinth and the Mariner remained.

"After you, Cuntface," Absinth said, jabbing the Mariner in the back with his rifle. The Mariner stepped inside.

The interior was just as exotically decorated, although now the images were less concerned with mythical beasts, but mythical people, heroes, lords, angels, villains and lovers. Kind brows, heroic jaws, roguish noses, sinister ears, all on a thousand faces. Every story of man was told, swirling about them. On the floor were countless cushions and in the centre sat the Oracle.

Her skin was dark and studded with jewels. Ribbons were entwined about her long black hair that pooled around her waist whilst she sat, cross legged, as if ready for meditation. Dan was already crouching before her, like a pupil ready to receive instruction.

“Welcome Henry Farthing who used to play with his brother by the canal. Welcome Jessica Wilson who studied tourism in Kent. Welcome Ken Wendell who used to steal cars with the Alsop twins.” She spoke to each person as they entered, and in sequence they all opened their eyes in surprise, silently sitting before her in awe. The Oracle spoke to each in a calm eloquent manner, which only changed when she laid eyes on the Mariner.

“Welcome Cun-” she paused, cocked her head to one side, and then quickly looked away. “Welcome Absinth Alcott.” She didn’t bother with an additional description for him, but instead turned her attention back to the Mariner, eyeing him with suspicion.

“Is it true? Are you the Oracle?” Dan asked, staring at her as a child does a clown.

“Yes. I am *The Oracle*.”

“Why should we believe you?” snorted Absinth, his gruff voice hacking apart the silky texture in the air. “We’ll ask questions and let’s see if you can answer ‘em.”

She looked at him patiently and shook her head.

“You may not question me... yet. But I shall prove to you my power.”

She smiled at the group and each stared longingly at her, lost in her charm and strange beauty. Turning to Dan, she

held his gaze, their eyes locked and unblinking.

“Hayley, an intimacy of yours?”

“I dated her for a couple of years...” he said, still staring into her eyes.

“She left you for your cousin.”

“Son of a bitch!” he cried out, furious and embarrassed. He looked at the rest of the group, his face flushed red. “I think she’s right. I mean... I don’t know if Hayley did, but it makes sense. Both of them did hang around a lot together, and right after she split with me, he and I stopped talking. I guess that’s the reason he was avoiding me. Fucker!” He whirled back to her. “How did you know?”

“I know everything.”

“How do we know this isn’t some cheap parlour trick?” Absinth was still not convinced. “You could be reading his mind or somethin’.”

“Wouldn’t that still be remarkable?” She flashed him a daring smile. The loaded grin of a croupier.

“It wouldn’t make you an oracle.”

“I told Daniel something he didn’t know. I’ll do it again. Jessica?” She fixed her eyes on the woman amongst them. Once again she looked at her for a few seconds before she spoke. “Your mother crashed her car whilst driving around Big Sur, California.”

At that the Mariner’s stomach took a twist. California. Home of his wine.

Jessica was nodding, urging the Oracle to continue. "You never knew why this happened, but I can tell you now. She had an epileptic fit, lost consciousness and drove off the road."

Jessica's eyes filled with tears and her hands shot to her mouth. "My uncle had epilepsy!"

The Oracle nodded solemnly. "Yes, as did she." She turned her attention to the cynic. "Absinth. Do you still doubt?"

He was less wary now, an eager glint glowing deep in his eyes. "Still not sure, to tell the truth," he said, though he joined them eagerly enough, leaving only the Mariner to stand by the exit, reluctant to come any further.

Absinth turned back to him. "Come on Cuntface, don't you want your fucking truth?"

"This is correct, I have truth to share," she said, her words like old glue. "But perhaps this man is not prepared for it? Perhaps he should leave?"

He didn't, but the Oracle acted as if he had and she turned to Absinth, looking down at him as a teacher does an infant.

"You were friends with a girl, Isabel. She was murdered."

Murdered.

The Mariner tensed, feeling sick with his own guilt. Absinth nodded, gazing back at her.

"You never knew who the murderer was-"

The Mariner's heart seemed to stop. What was that? Why nod along with the false claim? He *did* know!

“I can tell you who killed her.”

What did she mean she could tell him? He already knew!

“She was killed by a man named Claude, a sailor who you shared a cigarette with, that very night.”

Absinth looked shocked, horrified by the news. He stared at the floor, muttering the name ‘Claude’ to himself over and over. Then he stopped, his head slowly turning towards the Mariner.

“You killed her?”

This seemed to surprise the Oracle as much as he! Her head jolted in his direction, eyes narrowing as if he were a strange illness she couldn’t diagnose. Absurdly she hissed, “Cuntface?” with genuine surprise.

“You fucking murderer! It all makes sense.” Absinth was on his feet and marching towards the Mariner, who backed away, hands held out for defence. “How could I have been so stupid? Who else was on the island at that time, but you? Who else could have killed her? It all makes sense. You evil fuck!”

“But... but.. You knew it was me,” he pleaded, stumbling backwards. “I brought her body down in my arms, it was how we met!”

At this Absinth’s head suddenly lurched back, his face contorted and limbs stretched wide as if shocked. Great judders seemed to run up and down his body, throwing his shoulders, spine arched.

The rest watched with horror, but the Mariner had seen this before - when the philosophy teacher had changed. But

there were no chains this time, nothing to hold back the Mindless before him. The Mindless that now opened its furious eyes and focused them purely on the Mariner before it.

He ran, hampered by his exhaustion and his wounds, well aware that if it came to a fight he would be easily bested. That thing would tear him to pieces. In a matter of seconds he was out the tent and onto the path back down towards the ocean, fresh air replacing the incense from moments before. His nuts screamed, but their protests were ignored. His legs wailed but their dissent was firmly crushed.

The Oracle had already turned her attention back to her pupils and was soothing their concerns, telling them more anecdotes from their past. No wonder they were transfixed. Stories of the past must seem far more real than this island. Far better to listen than to acknowledge the demon their friend had become, a bloodthirsty creature that now charged after the fleeing 'Claude', 'Cuntface', 'Edward' and 'John'.

Every step was heavy, legs twisted as they caught roots and slid between stones. Absinth was having just as much trouble, his own body bloodied from countless cuts and gashes endured during the desperate chase.

The Mindless didn't care though.

The Mindless didn't think.

The Mariner reached the beach, his running becoming even more sluggish in the sand. Legs skidded and sank, knees twisting to even more uncomfortable angles. Flailing, he turned to look, to see if the zombie was still following. He was close, a picture of demented fury, though there were no thoughts behind that twisted face, only animal hate.

And then, popping into his head like ink from an octopus, the Mariner remembered a conversation he'd had with a poor murdered lady, many moons before. "Who was Winston Churchill?"

Absinth's face suddenly went slack and he ground to a halt, just a few yards away.

"He's er..." said Absinth, scratching his head. "He was the Prime Minister during the Second World War."

The Mariner didn't know whether his answer was true or not, but he did know the old man was back to his old self. The Mindless creature was gone, locked away from where it had emerged.

They stood in silence whilst Absinth blinked stupidly. He turned, looked at the gorge behind. "How the hell did I get down here?"

"She made you into one of the Mindless. She stole a memory and told it back, making you think she knew everything. She knows *nothing*. She's just a thief, stealing your thoughts, then telling them back. You've got a gap now, a hole in your head where the memory used to be. If you ever try to remember it, you'll become Mindless again. You will fall into that gap and become trapped."

Absinth stared in stunned disbelief.

"She's not the Oracle then?"

"No."

"What happened to the others?"

The Mariner looked up the gorge and shook his head. "She'll have taken even more by now. It's probably too late. Besides, why should I care?" He turned and headed for the boat. Grace, full from her meal, bounded over, eager to return to the ship now she'd had her fill.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going back to the Neptune. There's still answers out there and I need to find them."

"Let me come with you," the old man pleaded. "We'll be a great team, you and I."

"No," and then he repeated the question he'd asked before. "Why did you come here?"

The old man appeared as lost as any child. "The world's changed, Claude. I used to work in insurance. Do you know what that is?"

The Mariner shook his head. He didn't.

"Then one day, the world just... came apart. It's like I've fallen asleep and I can't navigate my way out of the dream. There's just ocean out there, and tiny fragments of the world I once knew."

"I never knew a world, but I envy you for it."

"I know where we can go to get supplies. A cave, not far from Brighton, but well hidden. All the tobacco you could want. And drink too. Wine, spirits, beer. Anything!"

The Mariner paused, tempted. The mention of wine had turned his stomach and itching had begun throughout his

system. He shook his head, sad and uncertain. "Nothing's changed, Absinth. We are incompatible."

The old man reached into his pocket and pulled out a pistol. The Mariner jumped, sure in the notion that the old man meant the bullet for him, but instead he pointed it at Grace and pulled the trigger. The bullet passed through the Tasmanian devil's back, severing her spine. It was so quick she didn't even have time to yelp. Grace collapsed, her breaths laboured and weak, her eyes confused and in pain. They rolled up to the Mariner, begging for her master to take the agony away.

Not like this, her eyes pleaded. Not out of the blue.

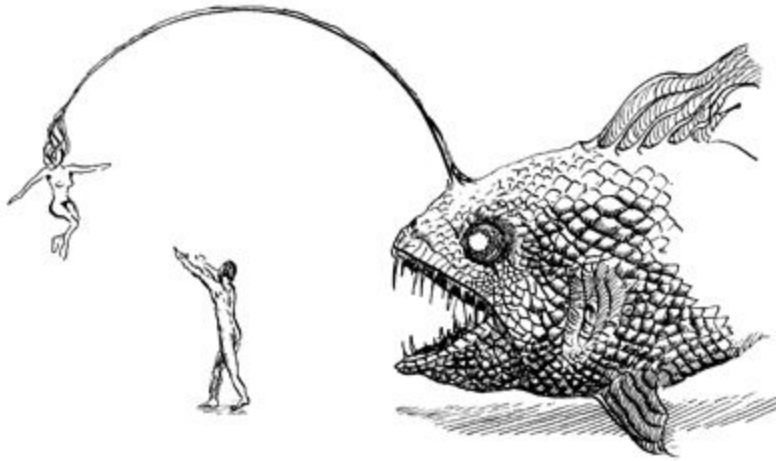


And slowly, too slowly for any conscious being to tolerate, she died, losing her grip on the world.

"We *weren't* compatible," Absinth beamed. "But *now* we are!"

The Mariner slowly nodded, looking at his new shipmate, a member of the crew through dead-devil's boots.

"And now we are."



9

TWO MEN ON THE SEA

ABSINTH AWOKE WITH A SORE head. There had been a fair amount of drinking, a celebration to have survived the island and its cursed Oracle.

He'd tried to convince the Mariner that they should take his ship, a faster modern vessel, but the Mariner had insisted that they use the Neptune. "Only she can find the true Oracle," he'd said.

So instead they had simply plundered Absinth's, grabbing his alcohol, tobacco, bullets and bread. He had a good feeling about this union. The Mariner was crazy, and badly damaged, but he was also sharp. He would get Absinth to all the places other people couldn't. And those are the places where riches are found. Who knows, perhaps they would even find this '*true* Oracle' of his?

They had drunk and sung together beneath the stars and thanked the heavens they were still alive.

So why, when he'd fallen asleep outside, did he now awake somewhere below deck? He was in one of the galleys, his arms and legs shackled to the wall.

"This used to be a prison ship. You told me that." The Mariner had been sitting in the shadows opposite, waiting for Absinth to awake.

"What's going on?" the old man slurred.

"Since you told me, I've begun hearing them. Sometimes I can hear them crying out for food, other times they're being whipped. Always screaming. I think most of them never got where they were being taken. They're still here somewhere."

His eyes roamed the dark room, as if emaciated ghosts lurked in every shadow.

"I didn't need you to tell me it was a prison ship though, I knew it all along. I knew. This is my prison. I don't know why, but it is."

Absinth looked at the Mariner, and, not for the first time, wondered who he was. "The Oracle slipped up because she didn't know who you were?"

The Mariner slowly nodded, "She couldn't guess my name because I don't even know it, so when she took the memory of Claude having killed Isabel, she thought it safe to tell you. There was no Claude in the room. No danger." He shook his head and coughed out a brief chuckle. "She was a trap, Absinth. A lie. When we met, I told you I was looking for an island, circled by a protective force, on which all the answers could be found. You're the one who spoke of an Oracle. I think now, that was all bullshit. That woman up there, the coral, the eels around it, even that whole island, all just a decoy, another distraction to keep me from the truth."

“What truth?”

“I don’t know.”

The Mariner got up and went for the door.

Absinth was afraid, no worse, petrified. He was sure the man meant to leave him in the darkness, alone with the ghosts and the rats. “I’ve seen the way you look at drink! You need it don’t you? It was the reason you let me on board. You leave me and I won’t help you find any more. You won’t see another drop for years!”

“I deserve to go thirsty. And that’s not the reason you’re aboard this ship.”

“You’re going to keep me captive down here?”

“Everyone I get close to, I end up hurting. Even poor Grace. I hurt her because I couldn’t take back the pain you’d caused. I couldn’t tell her everything would be alright.”

Absinth trembled, seeing for the first time how horribly he’d hurt the man by killing his pet. “Listen, I’m sorry I killed your rat. Okay? I’m sorry!”

But the Mariner didn’t hear. “I used to think I was being punished, put on this ship as some sort of penance for past sins. I no longer think that’s true. The Neptune is being punished, just as I. We’re stuck together, two monsters in the same cell. The punishment’s the world, not the boat. I can’t remember the horrors I committed. Does the Neptune, I wonder?” He looked around the room with haunted eyes and now Absinth was sure the Mariner *could* see ghosts, even if just in the confines of his own demented skull. He focused back on Absinth and gave a weary smile, in a strange way

intending comfort. "I'll take the blame Absinth. Let the fault lie with me."

The Mariner opened the door and half stepped through.

"Then let me go! Take me back to my ship, I'll be gone, you'll never see me again. Listen, you crazy fucker, don't leave me alone down here!" Absinth looked about nervously, terrified at the notion he could be left down in the belly of the Neptune, alone but for the ghosts of murdered convicts. "Let me out!"

The Mariner paused. "I'm sorry Absinth, but no. This ship is like me. I have demons within. The eels made that perfectly clear. I don't know where those demons came from, but they're there. This ship has some too. We've a lot in common, her and I. We've got a long journey ahead of us, and her devils need to eat."

"Devils? What devils?" But the Mariner was already gone.

And in the darkness, it were not ghosts, but a dozen furry bodies that began to emerge, hunger overriding their cautiousness.

Absinth screamed and kicked as best he could, but he'd been secured tight. The Neptune was, after all, a prison ship. In her time she had ferried convicts and slaves, monsters and madmen. Those who sailed within her soon learned that their journey was not one of geography, but misery.

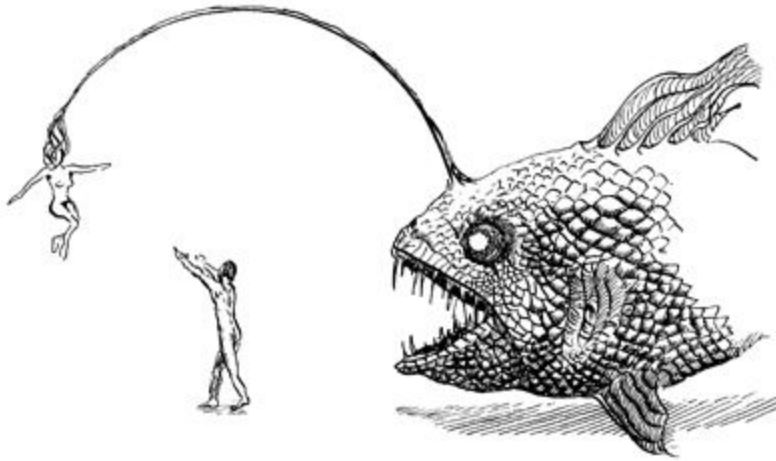
And Absinth Alcott embarked upon his own voyage as Grace's brood began to feed.

PART II

DOCTOR TETRAZZINI & HIS LIFE-AFFIRMING THEORY

A time-line burnt into a stone
I carve up myself when I'm alone
I've got a tiger arm





10

EVERY STORY HAS A BEGINNING

LIKE RAINWATER CASCADING THROUGH A filthy gutter, shame flushed out all other feelings from the boy's system as he lay prone across the bed. As usual that night he'd snuck into his parents' bedroom, aware they wanted him to sleep in his own, yet determined to feel that closeness supplied only by theirs. Being a toddler, he had little understanding of an adult's needs for privacy, nor did he have any concept of right and wrong, other than a rudimentary instinct instilled during the few years he'd been alive.

After complaining and whining he'd eventually won his way into their nest. His father was away, out of town for work, an absence that had weakened his mother's resolve to keep him out. With a warm feeling of safety he'd climbed into the bed, pulling the thick duvet up over his shoulders.

The boy thought it must have been his breathing that had caused the problem, as no other reason could be deduced in his infant mind. Sometimes his asthma made the air struggle as it escaped his lungs, causing a whistle out and a

hiss in. This must have kept his mother awake longer than she could bear, and for that the boy was sorry. His mother meant the world to him. Sometimes he would imagine what he'd do if he saw her fall from a cliff; at the thought tears would come to his eyes (even though it were all a fiction) and he promised himself he would hurl his body after her. Better to be dead than to lose his mother.

And thus, the suggestion that he would deliberately keep her up at night was preposterous, and yet he must have, because clearly she'd become frustrated with his wheezing; a pillow was held tightly over his face, hard enough to block out any possible breath.

He wanted to struggle free. His mind and body were already revolting against the suffocation, auto-survival instincts telling him to thrash about, anything to reunite him with life-giving air. He didn't though, for beyond the sound of his pounding heart he could hear his mother crying. Perhaps if he stayed completely still it would show that he was sorry? Perhaps she would forgive him and remove the pillow, then they could go back to sleep?

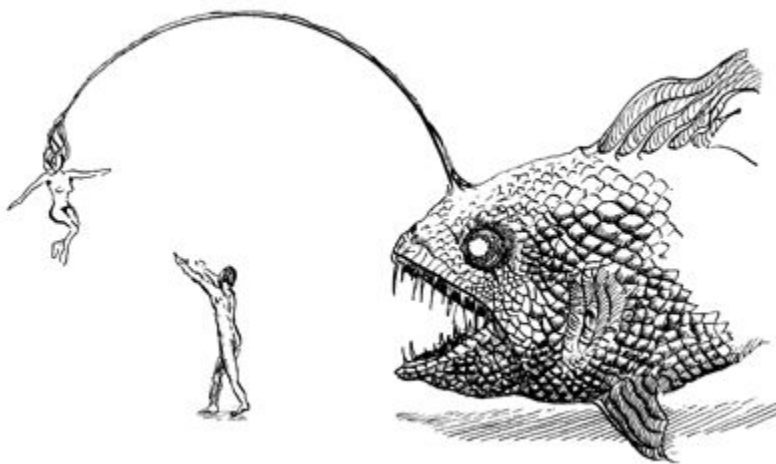
And then it seemed his wish came true. The pillow was removed and his mother rolled back into the darkness, her sobs concealed by a black void. The Boy couldn't bring himself to move. He hated himself for making her upset. His chest felt hollow and twisted; his heart beat wildly within the vacuum. It was no wonder his mother was disappointed with him.

He would always be a failure.

But suddenly he was dragged away, lifted from the bed by the soaring freedom that only comes from a dream's release. The Mariner awoke, crying and scratching at his face, thin

rolls of torn skin beneath his nails and red lines down each cheek. He lay in his bunk as the ship around him groaned, and after what seemed like an age, he slept once more.

And as it so often did, the dream returned.



11

SIGHISOARA

(Zig-ish-wa-rah)

SIGHISOARA LOOMED OUT THE OCEAN like a turd on a mat. A single dock jutted out of a land bristling with buildings, hundreds of ancient homes huddled together for mutual safety. Some on the outer circumference were dilapidated, ocean facing walls having fallen into the sea, the ground beneath eaten by erosion. Their insides now lay open for all to see. Weather-beaten kitchens and bedrooms homes to seagulls and rats, their human occupants long gone.

In the centre of the town rose a mighty hill that wore a great stone wall like a crown. Behind the wall were further buildings, even older in style and organised around a central courtyard. Within this enclosure the hill continued, and upon its lofty summit dwelt the only piece of ground supporting

wild trees, the copse looking like a collection of besieged soldiers, forced back into the final ramparts. And finally, amongst the trees shone a bright light; a beam from a lighthouse, placed there to warn ships in the dead of night.

The Mariner eyed the settlement, jubilant at the potential. He hadn't come across land in an age and all food had run out. More and more often he was forced into the bowels of the ship, into passageways he hadn't previously dared to tread, in search of basic sustenance. Occasionally he'd find rats. Sometimes strange mushrooms that made his head ache. Always just enough to survive, but not enough to keep the hunger-madness at bay. It gnawed at him, erasing thought of all else, even alcohol, which usually was his one true love.

A rumbling stomach made him look down. It wasn't his own; a Tasmanian devil stood nearby, its nose stretched out, sniffing the air, getting a better picture of the land ahead than the Mariner's tired eyes could ever ascertain.

"What do you think? Somewhere to rest?"

The devil turned and hissed. He scowled in return, prompting the threat to escalate.

"Blurrrrrghgghghh!" The animal's mouth opened wide revealing small white teeth and bright pink gums. Spittle flew onto the deck between them as the beast continued its warning, stamping its paws in pairs; first the right, then the left.

The Mariner backed off. Relations between him and the devils were not good. Several times the mutual animosity had broken out into open hostility, both parties lashing out: the Mariner with his fists, the devils with their teeth. The Mariner always came out worse. He understood well the

union's deterioration; they were starving. The bites and hisses were their way of warning him. Find food. Or we'll eat you.

The devil by his feet scampered off, back below deck where they ruled. The Mariner was relieved. The Neptune was an enormous ship. One could go weeks without having to run into any of the devils; they had many passages to explore, and the ship had a way of making you forget its entrails. Obfuscation was in its very essence.

The floating town appeared to be well populated. Often upon arriving at a settlement, the Mariner would find abandoned hovels and owner-less carts, empty clothes and plundered cupboards. But this time he could already make out citizens going about their business, mending roofs, carrying goods, selling food and mooring boats.

Civilisation.

The Mariner needed no other crew. Bizarre considering the Neptune was such a large vessel, but he never had any trouble controlling it. The ship docked easily, sliding in alongside the long wooden platform that served as the island's only port. There were other ships, but the Neptune dwarfed them all. Other sailors turned to stare, immediately cowed by the sheer size of their new rival. No doubt each and every one was wondering how he could steal her for his own. The Mariner wasn't worried. The devils wouldn't tolerate anyone else aboard. They had their slave, and not until he was worn to the bone-marrow would they seek another.

After lowering the anchor and gangway, the Mariner gathered up a set of tools and stepped off the boat and onto land for the first time in months. A smartly dressed man,

with an unruly beard that betrayed the care he'd taken in his attire, stepped out to greet him. Behind him, in sharp contrast to his jolly visage, gathered a small posse of men, whose sole purpose, it appeared, was to look stern.

"Greetings Sir," he began, reaching out an open hand. The Mariner stared at it. He wasn't accustomed to civil receptions, he was more used to bullets and screams. "I'd like to be the first to welcome you to Sighisoara. You won't find a better trading port for a thousand leagues, I can guarantee that!"

The Mariner squinted at the man as he spoke, trying to shield his eyes from the brightness of the sun reflected off the water's surface. In the crystal shallows below, large numbers of fish darted between rocks, colourful bodies distracting.

If the bearded man was offended by his palm left lonely and outstretched, he didn't show it. "Just over there you'll find Hawkins' Inn, where you'll find bed 'n' bread. If you're in need of the spiritual, Reverend McConnell's church is on the northern side, you can't miss it. If it's spirits of another kind you're after, then Hendrick runs a very good brewery. Just turn left when you hit the road and look for a sign with a serpent on. The *hisser-pisser* we like to call it."

At the mention of alcohol his stomach twisted and all of a sudden the Mariner's mouth was dry as parchment. Perhaps food could wait, just for a little bit?

"There is no fixed price for docking at Sighisoara, we merely ask that you donate ten percent of all your trade to the island's upkeep."

The Mariner shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid I'm not here to do much trading, just enough to get stocked up and move

on.”

Beardy looked crestfallen. “Oh, that’s fine.” He glanced up at the enormous ship that he’d pinned hopes of great riches upon. “If you change your mind, we could always drop it to five percent? You must have plenty of cargo to off-load.”

“No, no cargo. I’m not a trader.”

“Whatever.” The man scowled, his garrulous façade stolen. “Come find me if you change your mind. Let’s get the inspection over.”

“Inspection?”

“Yes of course!” The dock-master rolled his eyes with feigned nonchalance, though the pupils shot back to the Mariner like ferrets. “It won’t take long, we just need to make sure you’re not importing any banned goods.”

“Banned goods?”

The bearded man, demeanour transformed, barged past, followed by his gang of ‘inspectors’. They immediately began stomping up and down the deck, searching for any signs of goods ready to off-load.

“I told you I’m not here to trade-”

“What’s this?” declared Beardy as he waved above his head an empty bottle he’d found. “Wine eh? Something you’re not telling us? Any goods undeclared are confiscated, ain’t that right boys?”

“Right,” nodded the nearest one.

“It’s all gone,” muttered the Mariner, with more than a hint of sadness.

“Is that so? Then you won’t mind us searching, will you?”

It was then that a devil chose to venture above to see what the commotion was about. Its snout scanned left to right as if reading a book and almost immediately it began to growl. The guttural warning froze the intruders mid-plunder.

“What the fuck is that?” Beardy yelled, backing away from the terrier sized beast.

“They live here.”

“There’s more of ‘em? How many?” The whole gang backed away, seemingly unsure of how to deal with a creature they’d never laid eyes on before.

“I don’t know,” the Mariner shrugged. “I don’t go below deck very much.”

“You can’t dock here,” Beardy angrily remonstrated as he shuffled towards the gang-way. “What if they infest the town? Pests, I say, pests!”

“They won’t, they like to stay on ship.”

“Ha!” Beardy was clearly unimpressed, but keen to get away from the ugly beast. “If a single one is spotted on land, you’ll be arrested and your ship confiscated!” He waved a bony finger at the Mariner, using the threat as a final attempt to exert some authority.

The Mariner wearily nodded. “Sure. Now please leave.”

The welcome party disembarked, bodies bumping into each other in haste. They gathered together in a safe clump back on the dock, eyeing the Mariner suspiciously and muttering in dark tones.

The first thing that struck the Mariner, as he passed the rickety wooden platform and ventured between the first of the houses, was how distinct each building was. In the few settlements he'd stumbled upon each shack had been a copy of the last, defining elements established by entropy rather than design. These structures twisted and turned in different directions, stone façades painted a variety of pastel colours. Each different. Each unique. He found himself wondering that if these were works of men, perhaps the identical replications he'd seen previously were the work of a lazy copy-and-paste god?

The high population was instantly confirmed. Figures stood in adjacent doorways, peering from windows. Small, tanned and scrunched up faces, squinting expectantly. But they were not looking at him. They were waiting for something else.

And then he heard it. Music. Brass instruments and drums, their sombre timbre striking up in the residential mess. The sound grew louder so he dodged into the shade of a porch, looking along the cobbled street, waiting for the march to grow near. Others were doing the same and it felt odd to stand in a crowd, to be amongst human beings. It was stuffy and uncomfortable, but the Mariner didn't flee. His curiosity had been piqued.

An elderly gentleman took off his hat and smoothed down a lock of wispy white hair as a mark of respect. It was then the Mariner realised the nature of the sombre sound; it were a

funeral march. Someone had died, and the town had turned out to mourn.

I am here to tell you about Jesus Haych Christ. God's fella sent to Earth.

I can see you are sinners, a fearful flock, in need of a rock in these dark times. And there is a boulder in this ocean for you. That stable island you seek is not that upon which we stand, it is not your ship nor your home, it is not the drink that Hendrick pours down your throats in exchange for your mother's necklaces and wedding bands, it is not the gun you keep under your bed, it is not the doctor who preaches his science from a'top the hill, and it is certainly not a tradesman's galley fresh from faraway waves. No my faithful congregation, it is none of these things. It is a man who is dead, yet still alive. It is a man who passed beyond our world, yet remains in our hearts. Jesus Haych Christ. God on earth.

We have committed the greatest sin we are capable of: forgetting him, forgetting his wisdom. No doubt some of you have never heard his name, but do not fear, there is still time to save your souls from this sinking world. Listen close, for I will tell.

Jesus was a carpenter, taught by his father who in turn was taught by his. He lived in a time before the floods, when our world was a single piece and islands stretched for miles. The Roamings ruled back then. A vast and powerful nation, but cruel too, always expanding, conquering, destroying. Jesus was not a Roaming, but a subject of them, his people bound to do their bidding. It was that or die.

One day, Jesus was summoned to stand before a Roaming called Pontoon Pilot, the local governor charged with

upholding a brutal law.

“I hear you are the finest carpenter in the land,” he said. “I have a task for you. Twelve have sinned and twelve must die. Examples shall be made of each and every one. I want you to craft a dozen crosses large enough for a man to be affixed to.”

“Begging your pardon, my Lord,” the carpenter asked. “How will these men be affixed? How strong does the wood need to be?”

The Roaming eyed Jesus suspiciously, but soon cast away his doubts, confident he would not be betrayed. “Each man will be nailed to his cross and then each cross will be planted in the Tear of the Gods.”

At hearing this Jesus wept, for he understood the punishment fully. The Tear of the Gods was a valley that flooded every month, on the full moon when the river swelled.

The men would be drowned for their crimes.

But Jesus had no choice but construct the crosses as ordered and a week later the flood and the punishments were due. Each convict was put upon a cross and the local townsfolk stood atop a hill to watch.

The waters rose and the sinners screamed in fear, but not one person felt sympathy for them. No-one, that is, except for Jesus. Just as the waters reached their necks, Jesus walked from the crowd and into the rising tide.

Silence descended upon the watchers, for the lowly carpenter did not sink, but walked upon the water as if it were the thickest of ice. He reached the condemned twelve

and released them one by one, pulling the nails out of their hands and kissing each wound in turn, healing the broken flesh.

Pontoon Pilot was furious and ordered his men into the water to arrest Jesus Haych Christ, but the currents were strong and each Roaming was dragged beneath the surging torrent.

Jesus turned to the crowd and spoke. "I have forgiven these men, their crimes are clear in the eyes of God. For God is within us all, and so is the power of absolution. When we reach out to one another, we pull ourselves closer to God. I ask you all to do the same."

That was the first preaching of Jesus Haych Christ, the son of God, and those twelve men became his Disciples.

His message is as true now as it was then.

Forgive.

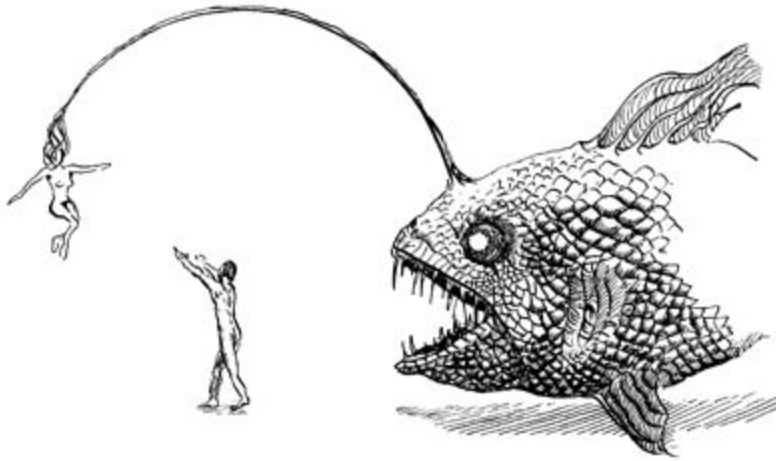
Say it with me people. Forgive.

Reach out with your hearts and your souls, and look out across the waves and perhaps one day we will see Jesus Haych Christ walk out across the endless ocean, returned from his torment with Disciples in tow.

Say it with me. Forgive.

Forgive.

- The Shattered Testament by The Reverend McConnell



12 LAST RITES

THE MARINER WATCHED THE FUNERAL from his vantage point, high upon the rising slope. He stood in the shade of the mighty inner wall, allowing the cool stone to sooth his sun-scorched back. After following the procession for a while, he'd returned to the Neptune and gathered his tools, finally returning to a quiet point where he could watch the events unfold. Like a vulture he scrutinised, unnoticed from on high.

Around a hundred people had turned out for the girl's burial; they had meandered through town, a band playing the march to match the people's tears. Women had wailed and men cursed. The local holy-man, Reverend McConnell, led the procession, his scriptures clasped in his hands, muttering prayers and pleadings for the deaths to stop. The Mariner did not know how the girl had died, but was sure this was not the first death of this sort. The procession had an air of the rehearsed about it.

Finally they arrived at the town's small graveyard, an embarrassingly tiny plot of land for what was such a large community. But this was a first generation town, peoples thrown together, forced to eke out an existence on an island barely capable of sustaining a third of their number, a fact painfully clear as they stood around the hole in the ground, so many baring witness that most were forced to watch from upon graves filled just weeks before. An uncomfortable position, made plain by their anxious glances to the loose soil at their feet.

A man stood removed from the crowd in a position of honour. The dead girl's father. The onerous grief could be seen from the grey in his face to the dead of his eyes. All held him in high regard. His sorrow gave him importance, at least for today.

The Mariner toyed with his bag, a leather satchel containing the tools he would need: a pick, shovel, candle, matches, rope . It was a shame to watch them pour earth into the very same hole he would have to empty later, but there was nothing he could do about that. Patience. That was the key.

But patience was hard to come by. He was starving, and not just for food. The Mariner was an alcoholic, a slave to devils and the demon drink, and both would be loath to forgive such delay. But the Mariner understood well that once he began drinking, there would be no end. He had to acquire a meal for the devils before that grim process began. They'd tolerate nothing less.

The service lasted until sundown and the Mariner waited in the shadows until the final mourners slouched away. Perhaps some in the crowd saw him, but it didn't matter, he wouldn't stay in Sighisoara long. After gathering food and booze the

Mariner would be off, continuing his search. There wouldn't be time to incur their wrath.

Once alone, the Mariner set to work. The earth was soft and grave shallow, his spade easily removing the blanket of soil that was supposed to keep the girl eternally warm. He glanced at the wooden cross placed at the head of the pit. 'Theresa'. It held no surname, nor did it hold dates. In this world there were no dates, there was no time beyond the day before and the day after. Anything outside of those were anyone's guess.

As he dug he didn't feel villainous; more a trifle rude, as if he were pulling the duvet off a shift-worker, just gone to bed. The dirt looked oddly comfortable.

A luxury beyond our times, luv, he thought. Can't let good meat spoil.

Theresa hadn't been buried in a coffin, a waste of scarce wood. Instead, an old cloth had been stitched about her. It hung closely, the tailor keen to use the minimum material possible. It pulled about her like a mask, stained and bug-ridden. The Mariner brushed off as much dirt as he could. Stitches proved weak as he ran a knife along the seam and like a pod, the death-shroud popped open, revealing the peas within.

The girl couldn't have been dead for longer than a day. She was a pretty young thing, no more than seventeen at the most. Her hair, protected from the earth by the shroud, was a rich golden colour that shimmered in the moonlight. It brought a little light to her pale face, milky skin that descended into darkness as it reached her throat, for the throat was coated with dried blood from the long slit that reached from ear to ear.

No guilt. The girl was dead; if there was anything left of her, it wasn't here. This was just flesh. It would either be eaten by worms, or by his devils, it mattered not to her.

The Mariner swung the dead body over his shoulder and without bothering to fill in the grave, headed for his boat. First the Neptune's devils, then his own. This was the deal the Mariner promised himself as he carried young Theresa's corpse, her flesh stiff under his grasp.

The dock was quiet. In the distance the Mariner could hear the sound of a wake, merriment and sorrow breaking out in equal measure as each tried to cope with reality as best they could. How would they react, he wondered, if they saw their beloved being feasted upon by the dozen or so monsters? Her body laid out like a delicious feast?

Once upon the Neptune the Mariner sighed with relief, realising just how nervous being away from his vessel made him. There was a safety in his floating tomb.

He dumped the body and waited. Small dark bodies scurried out of the shadows, their flanks trembling with anticipation. Without a grunt of thanks they began to feast, noisily scoffing mouthfuls of torn flesh. The Mariner didn't flinch, he'd witnessed them eat from people before and this time he had the luxury of darkness.

"Enter."

The voice, a man's, made the Mariner jump. He looked around in surprise, scanning the familiar silhouettes. Everything seemed as it was, all in its proper place. No intruders except in his own imagination.

But then he heard the sound of a door opening and closing. A familiar creak. Someone had entered the captain's cabin!

The Mariner pulled his clunky pistol out its holster, the metal grip cold in his hand and the muzzle looking like ice in the dim light. There was an intruder on board, one that the devils had missed. And no wonder, they were as hungry as he was thirsty!

He crept forward, sliding below deck as silent as a gentle breeze. Ahead he could hear a muffled murmuring. There were two distinct voices: two intruders. He couldn't make out any words, the wood was too thick for that, even when he pressed his ear against the seam.

The captain's cabin wasn't far beneath the top deck, and occasionally the Mariner slept within, but only when the weather was too bad to sleep under the night sky. There was something sour about the Neptune's innards. Something rotten.

The Mariner pushed the door open an inch, relying upon the darkness to conceal his movement.

Dim candlelight illuminated within, lighting the two figures whilst plunging their backs into black. One was sat at the table, a familiar desk the Mariner had eaten meagre meals at many times before. Only it seemed this man had brought all sorts of personal effects along with him; alien cutlery, plates, glasses, a compass, quill - all manner of items the Mariner hadn't seen before were laid out with care. The man at the desk was dressed in smart but practical garb and he scowled at the other who stood before him.

"So what are we to do?" he sneered. He looked like a bland painting whose canvas had warped. "I can't have you making so much noise, my crew need to sleep. How can we shut you up? Hmm?"

The quaking figure under judgement was that of a woman. Unlike him she wore no finery, but a collection of filth-stained rags. Her hands were clasped in chains, the arms above them emaciated and covered in sores. She didn't respond to him but instead kept her eyes locked on the floor, respectful and afraid.

"We still have many weeks before Port Jackson, and I can't be having these complaints. Do you understand? Do you?"

The woman nodded. Tears drawing lines down dirty cheeks. Her eyes looked like two tiny heads on pink spikes.

"Kneel," he commanded. The woman sank to her knees, chains rattling.

"Closer."

She inched closer to him, wincing in pain.

"I said closer!" The captain slapped her hard around the face and clasped her hair in his hand. She lost her balance as he yanked her forward, keeping her aloft in his grip. She screamed, her voice hoarse and tired. A scream more familiar to the throat.

"There you go again!" He laughed a little. "Making unnecessary noise!" The captain's other hand pulled at the belt in his lap, fingers making quick work in the shadows. His penis rose like the head of a surfacing shark.

The woman tried to murmur something, but the captain had no interest in entertaining protest. He pulled her forward, punching her as a jokey would spur a horse. Blood leaked from her mouth as she went limp and gave in to his advances. Falling forward, her small mouth opened and took

him inside. The captain leaned back and with a dark smile roughly clenched her hair to force a rhythm of his choosing.

The Mariner watched, horrified by the rape. He knew he should put a bullet in this man's face and put out that horrible smirk, but he was glued to the spot, hiding in the darkness like a peeping tom. And like said tom, there was a certain dark thrill about watching. The sight was horrible, truly horrible, and yet there was a stirring within. A dark and terrible urge the Mariner knew well.

The captain continued to force the woman's head up and down. A clump of hair tore loose; he threw the lock to the side and took hold of another. His victim gave a pitiful groan, but this only brought further delight to her torturer and further firmness to their voyeur.

Finally, the captain grunted and pulled her head firmly into his lap, emptying himself inside. He let go and she fell onto the floor, coughing and spluttering, her lungs taking in gasps of air between harrowed sobs.

However the beast wasn't to be so easily placated. He tucked himself back into his trousers and stood, face blank and rigid. All sinister myrth gone. The Mariner's breath quickened as he watched him kick the victim, first in the stomach, then the breasts before finally her face. Over and over he'd kick and stamp, her initial cries turning to wheezes, ending with a final listless whimper. Soon the only sound she made was a mushy squelch, though that was more attributable to his boot.

When her body finally relinquished its fragile grip upon her sorry life, the captain suffered an orgasmic judder and with his handkerchief dabbed sweat from his brow. Then, as if

nothing had happened, he strolled back and took his place in his seat.

“Enter.”

The Mariner tensed. Was the captain speaking to him? Had he known he was hiding outside all this time? Absurdly, the Mariner was primarily concerned with being caught with an erection, evidence plain to see that he’d enjoyed the scene.

But before he could move, the door opened by itself. No, not by itself, there had been someone beside him the whole time! It was a woman, dressed in rags and bound in chains.

It was her! The woman he’d just seen murdered! She walked into the captain’s room solemnly, legs shaking. It was then the Mariner noticed the murdered body had disappeared, all evidence of the terrible crime erased.

The captain looked up at her with a scowl of frustration and disappointment. And something else. Excitement? The Mariner understood why. He knew what was on the captain’s mind. He’d seen what had happened. What was about to happen again. Who were these people? Ghosts? Visions? Memories?

The scene unfolded several times that night. Each time exactly the same as before. Each time the Mariner became aroused by the sexual violence, and each time his reluctance to masturbate diminished.

Repetition became tradition. Conditioned to love the pain.

The visions stopped when the Mariner, like the captain, finally found release.

Patient Number 0020641

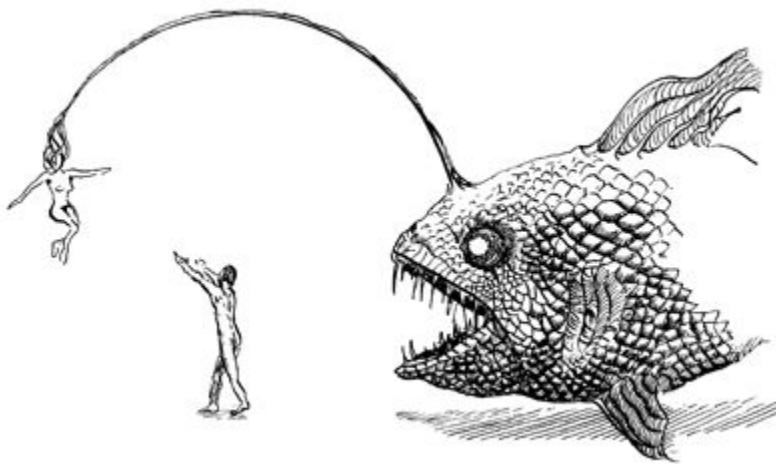
Name: Donna Selwyn

Treatment is taking longer than anticipated due to the limited scope of viable opportunities for rehabilitation. The nature of the addiction makes her the trickiest patient so far, but I'm confident progress can be made.

The physical injuries are healing well, most of the bandages are off and although the scars will remain, I'm sure they can be concealed cosmetically. The problem will be finding appropriate cosmetics in this primitive town, but perhaps with enough time a trading ship will carry the goods to meet her needs.

My biggest concern is to find a proper outlet for her compulsion, without *that* any progress will be minimal. As with Grace, I am forced to be creative.

T.



13
HAZY PROMISES

SMOKE FILLED HIS NOSTRILS. SOMETHING was burning, his throat hurt and his eyes stung, lids clogged as they tried to open. Had he finally died and gone to hell, a fiery cavern deep beneath the waves? Or was the ancient and sturdy Neptune the fuel to the fire? Could he be about to sink?

Deep whooping coughs juddered his chest and the Mariner rolled onto his side, pulling his legs up in pain. The movement was slow, and the alcohol in his system sent the world spinning, twirling over and over. Knees met his chest, vomit gushing from his throat coating each like protective pads. Where were his devils? Why hadn't they woken him with howling at the first hint of smoke?

Utter disorientation gripped him. He was not aboard the Neptune at all. He was in a bar, drinks lined carefully behind a long varnished counter. The glass from the bottles sparkled and danced as the flames illuminated the walls with their incendiary glare. There was no bar within the Neptune (if there had been, it would have been drained years before), no such luxuries upon a slave ship. This was somewhere else entirely.

The fire had progressed beyond anything controllable. Every object seemed a possible fuel for the furnace; the entire décor was wood, with a healthy amount of spirits stored in barrels stacked in the corner, promising Armageddon when lit.

He tried to wail, to get some words out, a cry for help, anything, but the best he could manage was a grunt. Drunkenness made the whole scenario eerily surreal. Vision was paper thin, heat upon his arms a fever, the smoke in his nostrils a delusion. Only a deep rooted last-minute sense of self-preservation manned the internal alarms. If only his body could respond to the urgent screams inside his head!

Sick once again rose in his throat and a crippling agony flared in his gut. Perhaps he should just burn and get death over with? Better that than slowly rotting away at the bottom of a bottle. Better to cook quick than slowly stew from the inside-out.

And then, shouting. Frantic calling. A man was grabbing the Mariner by his shoulders and was dragging him towards the door, bits of flaming ceiling falling about them.

Bellowing against the fire's roar, the hero promised rescue as he heaved the Mariner's body the last few yards. The floor scratched at his back and a piece of burnt wood jabbed into his side, briefly catching the Mariner's soiled coat alight. "Almost there!"

The voice meant little to the Mariner. Despite the burning death before him, and despite the inner auto-pilot that had awoken him in the first place, he wanted to be left in the bar. The spirits could still be drunk, combustion had not erased them yet.

Cool air wafted over him as they fell through the front door and into the night. About them, people were dashing to and fro with buckets, throwing upon the conflagration liquid that boiled instantly. Chaos. It hurt his sore head to be amongst such noise and kept his eyes firmly shut, afraid the stinging would hurt too much if he opened them again.

"He's the one! Bring that prick to me!" someone, certainly not the hero, shouted above the din. Loud gravelly footsteps thudded towards him.

"Keep back Hendrick!" the hero warned. "He didn't start it."

"Bullshit! He broke in, stole my booze, and set the place alight!"

Was that it? Was he to blame? The Mariner couldn't remember doing any such thing, but then again, he didn't even remember being there in the first place. He remembered watching ghosts locked in a macabre dance. He remembered shame. And then? Had he broken into a bar? Had he set it alight? Had his alcoholism really made him do that?

"I'm going to break his fucking neck!"

"Wait!" The Mariner heard the hero step between him and the angry landlord. There was still plenty of activity around them, alarmed villagers trying to prevent a catastrophe, but by the sound of it they were having little luck. "He didn't set the fire, I saw someone else do it!"

"Who?"

"I don't know, I saw them light it from the outside and they ran off. I was looking for this man, he's a patient of mine. An alcoholic!"

"So he did break in?" The furious Hendrick sounded unconvinced.

"Yes, but it's irrelevant! Someone else has burnt it down and this man's in treatment and couldn't possibly do it again." The Mariner doubted the man could ever be convinced, but did not hear any further protest. The hero spoke with authority and staggering aplomb. "Now get away from this place, before it gets worse!"

Once again the Mariner felt the hero's hands under his arms as he was dragged further from the burning building, cold gravel under his back rather than hot floorboards. The owner, Hendrick, shouted some half-hearted objections, but soon his voice faded, lost in the commotion. Eventually the

din died away, the hero was taking him far from the blaze and recriminations. Finally the Mariner was dropped in a patch of wet grass. It cooled his back (he thought he even heard it hiss) and his rescuer fell beside him, panting.

The Mariner croaked, his throat was sore from both drink and smoke. He tried to speak, but could not, and the Mariner's neck slumped slack upon his shoulders.

"I lied to that man," the hero whispered. "Though I am a doctor, that much is true. My surgery is at the top of the hill, you can't miss it."

The doctor's face swam in and out of focus in amorphous benevolence, but the Mariner managed to grasp his words, tenuous as that grasp may have been.

"You didn't start the fire, and I *did* see someone else set it, a patient of mine. Most unfortunate." The doctor placed his hands on the Mariner's shoulders, bringing his face in close so the inebriated sailor could understand. "My friend, you clearly have a problem. I'm not surprised, the sea always brings those in need of salvation to my shore. I can rid you of this addiction. I've done it before, many times over. I can set you free."

The hero removed his hands from the Mariner and stood up, glancing about nervously, as if concerned some might have overheard his confession of omitting the arsonist's identity when asked.

"Like I said, I live at the top of the hill, the highest point in Sighisoara. Come to me if you decide you need help."

The Mariner struggled to hear the hero's final words amongst the din, but to him it sounded something like, "My

name is Doctor Tetrazzini, and I would like save you with my life-affirming theory.”

And then great sadness fell upon Christ for the Shattering came. The world turned on itself, land drifted from land, countries tore themselves asunder. The sin of our world so great, the very ground couldn't tolerate it.

As brother turned on brother and mother forgot son, Jesus tried to maintain. He gathered his disciples about him for a final supper, a sharing of food and ideas. But there was one who did not join them. Judas. He had strayed far from Jesus' teachings of peace and forgiveness. He had found himself his own set of disciples who followed their ungodly master across the land on motorised vehicles. That was Judas' life now, he and his vehicle were one. Judas and Chariot.

It was on these dangerous contraptions that Judas found Jesus and his disciples. Feeling terrible rage at his once close mentor, Judas and his men attacked. The disciples fled down the road, trying to make their escape, but the motorised chariots were too fast and each disciple was crushed beneath their wheels. Jesus looked on, helpless. A crow squawked. They were dead.

This sent Jesus mad. He began prowling the highways seeking revenge against Judas and all those who'd defied God's will. The Road Messiah they called him, wandering, lost, as the Shattering tore mankind's world apart

One day, after many travels, Mad Jesus found where Judas in Chariot lived. It were a vast makeshift citadel deep in the desert. Jesus was one man against many, and Judas stood on top mocking his once great leader.

“Just walk away,” he boomed. “Walk away.”

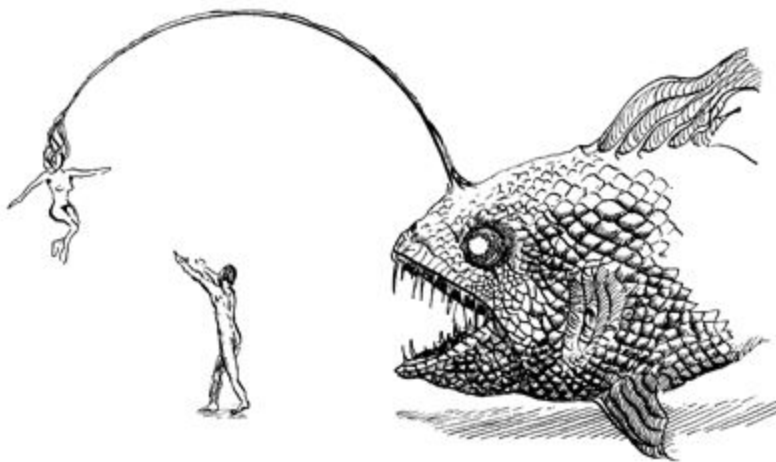
Mad Jesus wasn't going to be stopped by Judas' powerful voice, nor his equally powerful flesh. With an almighty bellow Jesus charged the citadel. Seeing his eyes bright with fury, Judas' minions fled, but their chariot mounted master stood firm, confident he could slay Jesus in combat.

But Mad Jesus had no intention of falling under Judas' sword, or have his legs cut to ribbons by the chariot's scythed wheels. As he ran he pulled out of his pocket a slingshot, primed and ready. With each thud of his feet in the dirt, Jesus swung the sling about his head: once, twice, thrice! On the third he let go, sending a small stone hurtling towards his once close friend.

The stone struck Judas in the temple, cracking his skull and ending his life right then and there. Mad Jesus stood over his body and offered up a prayer to God, pleading forgiveness for slaying a man once his brother.

But God did not forgive Jesus. Not this time.

- The Shattered Testament by The Reverend McConnell



THE GOOD DOCTOR'S GRACE

THE MORNING BROUGHT CHILLS AND not just from the morning dew. Waking with pain was familiar to the Mariner, his alcoholism had long ago sent his stomach rotten, but there was a weakness and an ache in his joints that was even more insidious. For a moment he imagined himself on some sort of torture device, ropes tightly wound around his limbs, slowly twisting them in their sockets until any moment they'd snap clean off. No snap came. It was his own abuse that had led him to feel this way, no-one else's doing.

Drunkenness a distant and fond memory, he sat up, a hand held against his temple to ward off the throbbing pain. Where he lay there was a central grassy slope, overshadowed by an enormous clock tower made from pale yellow stone. The prominence of the time-device had not given it any sense of importance to the peoples of Sighisoara as they had twisted the clock hands to absurd angles, making nonsense of the time depicted.

The Mariner got up and brushed himself down. His hands became slimy from the act, the dew thick on his clothes. As he rightened himself his lungs gave a quiver, air momentarily escaping him. He was wretched. Time to find his boat and recover there, perhaps gather some blankets and get some proper sleep. He'd need food too; that matter of great importance had somehow fallen to the side-lines the moment he'd tasted booze.

The hill offered a good vantage point, and he could clearly see the ocean and the dock. His ship was easily the largest, though there were plenty of contenders for second place. Large fishing vessels of various ages and states of disrepair

surround the Neptune like suckling pigs, or perhaps curious children eager for tales of distant lands. The Neptune would give them no child-friendly stories though, hers were all of suffering and darkness. He knew it well, she'd narrated one only last night.

The Mariner shivered again at the thought of the ghosts he'd seen within her belly. Had he actually witnessed them? Or had the only spirits he'd encountered been vodka and whiskey? Had it all been a dream?

A stabbing pain in his gut sent the Mariner crashing to the ground. He skidded forward, knees gouging muddy tracks into the grass. Such was the reality of the alcoholic; more must be found, only then would the pain subside.

And then the face of Doctor Tetrizzini swam into the Mariner's mind. Didn't he say something about a cure? Something about salvation? Something about a theory?

All about him, Sighisoara dwellers were watching and muttering. Perhaps they were discussing the fire? Perhaps the grave robbery? Either way, both roads led to the Mariner. All accusations ended with him.

The Mariner got back to his feet. He could see the hill rising up in the centre of town. At the top sat a large shiny building nestled amongst the trees. The sunlight reflected off it; what the Mariner had first thought a lighthouse were in fact enormous glass panels cleaned to perfection.

He could go there, if just to hide from prying eyes full of anger and suspicion. Too much attention had been ensnared in too short a time. He needed a place to hide.

The Mariner made his way up the hill, step by step closer to Doctor Tetrizzini's clinic.

“Welcome to rehab.” The woman standing before him looked tired, but happy, as if she’d just stepped in from a lengthy afternoon pruning the roses. “Please come in, my name’s Rebecca.”

The Mariner stepped inside the building. The architecture was an odd mix, some parts stone and others shiny metal and glass. He marvelled at the variety.

“It used to be a church, but someone must have wanted it to be larger. Only the core is stone, the structure around it modern.”

“Modern.” The Mariner rolled the word around his mouth, marvelling at how redundant it felt.

“Frank said you might be joining us. He’ll be pleased, this place was going to get a lot quieter in a few days, so you’ll stop us getting bored.”

“Quieter? Why?”

“Beth’s finished her treatment. Cured. She’s leaving in a few days.”

“Really? Alcoholism gone?”

“No, that wasn’t her addiction. The doctor treats all sorts. It’s not my place to talk about other cases, but if you ask, Beth will tell. She’s very open about her illness. That’s all part of the treatment, learning to come to terms with the addiction and be open.”

“Are you open about yours?”

“Sure.” Rebecca flashed the Mariner a smile. “But not to people who haven’t even introduced themselves.”

“Oh,” the Mariner stammered. He was always stumped when it came to this part of interaction. “I don’t really have a name.”

Rebecca nodded, finding understanding where there was none. “When I first checked in, there was a heroin addict who’d abused himself so much he’d forgotten everything other than the needle. But it turns out that’s not a block in the road to recovery; the doctor helped him build a new life. He became the man he wanted to be.”

“Is he still here?”

“No, he checked out a while back.”

The room they were in was bright and comfortably furnished. It was a world away from the dark interior of the Neptune. Chairs, the like of which he’d never seen, were spread out, the spaces between decorated with potted plants. He walked over to one chair and gently ran his hand over it. Leather. Remarkable.

“I’m going to leave you alone for a minute and get the doctor. Make yourself comfortable.”

Rebecca left the room with the Mariner’s eyes upon her, and passed through a door that swung silently on its hinges. The Mariner sat on a sofa, relishing its soft support. Filthy nails and torn cuticles stared up from his lap. Bright lights and clean surfaces were an unknown influence, and they highlighted his bedraggled state. Was this really the place for him?

Surprisingly, despite his exhaustion, he found himself unable to shift the image of Rebecca's behind from his tired head, the way her hips swayed slightly with every step, the curves of her clothed buttocks. He felt a familiar stirring. It had been a long time since he'd met a woman, not since-

No, he didn't want to think about that.

But perhaps it was time to put that behind him? And Rebecca appeared a fine way to do just that. The *right way* this time.

"I'm glad you decided to join us."

The Mariner was surprised Doctor Tetrazzini had appeared without notice, a quick glance at the floor explained the stealth; it was carpeted in rich green fuzz. Soft. Everything was soft.

Tetrazzini confidently strode over and shook the Mariner's hand. He was the older, hair grey and face lined from age rather than toil. A small beard speckled with gold surrounded his board smile. Even his clothes seemed non-threatening: a purple sweater with a picture of a dog knitted into it.

"You may not remember, my name is Doctor Tetrazzini. Though if you forgot that, you clearly managed to remember my message. Welcome to rehab."

"Rebecca said you treat all addictions?"

"Oh yes," Tetrazzini nodded enthusiastically. "Everyone I invite is an addict. All addictions, chemical and psychological, are cured within these walls. Without a shadow of a doubt I can tell you there is a hundred percent success rate."

“This place is certainly unique.”

Tetrazzini looked about the room as if seeing it for the first time. “Yes, I suppose it is. I’ve spent so much time up here I forget just how archaic the rest of the world has become.” His kindly face suddenly registered concern. “What’s wrong?”

The Mariner hesitated. “I have nothing to offer in return. For the treatment I mean.. and saving my life.”

“No money? No goods?”

The Mariner shook his head.

“No matter,” Tetrazzini dismissed the matter of payment with a flick of his hand. “Patients are usually so grateful, they return and pay me weeks, even months later.”

“You have weeks and months here?”

“I have an old calender that I keep a careful watch on. It’s only for one year, so obviously needs to be adjusted every time it’s reused, but at least it gives some sense of time passing.” The Mariner didn’t bother asking what year it was; such a concept was meaningless.

“Come, walk with me while we talk.” Tetrazzini led the Mariner for a brief tour around the grounds.

Returning to the outside, fresh air, warm sun and gentle cooling breeze took the Mariner by surprise. On his way up he’d been so concerned with the pain wreaking havoc upon his body and mind that the outside world hadn’t factored for much. Now that he was taking the time, he could see it was beautiful. The hill and copse crown offered a panoramic view of Sighisoara, the multicoloured medieval buildings, brilliant

in the sunlight, looked like a candy necklace laid around the rising citadel.

“You’ve got the best place on the whole island.”

“Maybe, maybe,” Tetrazzini conceded. “The ruins give the impression of importance, but the walls supply no protection. The gates are always open. The days of this being an operating fortress are long gone. The view, however, can’t be beat.”

The Mariner watched as a large gull swooped overhead, close to the trees and then out over the drop, soaring above the town below.

“I suppose you’re curious about how this is all going to work? I treat addiction with a simple two-pronged approach. Firstly, counselling. Don’t be intimidated. It’s only a small part of the treatment. Some doctors believe that addiction arises from psychological flaws, from displaced negative emotions and the such, and the way to cure addiction is by treating these root causes. Their theories are not welcome here. It is my theory that addiction is a simple chemical imbalance that can be corrected the same way it was caused: with chemicals. Medication. The therapy is just to ease the transition. Some find that when released from the grip of their disease, they feel empty and lost. Not surprising given how long their affliction dominated their lives.”

“So the second prong is drugs?”

Doctor Tetrazzini nodded, studying the grass in front as they strolled around the rehab centre. Down below the sounds of the town floated up, sounding eerily close despite their great height. “Drugs, yes, although they are mild on the system. You won’t find any side effects or withdrawal. My medication is designed to end intoxication, not cause it.”

It all sounded too good to be true. Could this doctor be serious? Could his addiction be cured by just a few pills? For the first time in an eternity the Mariner felt hope. Real hope instead of trudging weariness. One thing worried him though, would he get a chance to have a final drink before the therapy began? Surely, to start this difficult journey feeling so awful would hamper progress?

“That door over there leads to the guest quarters, though occasionally patients stay in the infirmary on the other side. Sadly, one of my patients is there almost permanently because of wounds acquired in her destructive past. You, on the other hand, will stay in one of these rooms and have access at any time to the garden outside for your recreation and relaxation.”

Ahead were two figures sat upon a bench, enjoying the shade of a tree. One was a woman in a thin polo-neck, a book upon her lap that she studied intently. Beside her was a young girl, no more than seven, kicking at the ground and looking thoroughly bored.

“Who are they?”

“One of my many success stories. Beth Masterson. She’s only with us for a few more days, she’s completely cured.”

“What was her addiction?”

“Why don’t you ask her?” Tetrazzini held up a hand and called to Beth. She looked up, beamed a smile and approached them, leaving the book in her place. The girl picked it up and flicked through the pages. Whether she enjoyed it or not could not be seen, her thick brown hair spilled in front of her face from her tilted head.

“Beth, I’d like to introduce you to our latest guest!”

“Welcome,” she said taking his hand in hers. “You’re safe here, the doctor is a genius. Our hero!”

“Not so, not so,” Tetrazzini pleaded. “It’s you who do the work. I just dish out the pills.”

“Well, even if that was true, I’m sure I would be dead if I hadn’t found this place.”

Tetrazzini addressed the Mariner. “Beth was in a very bad state when her boat arrived. Another day out at sea and I doubt the rest of the crew would have bothered feeding her.”

Beth shook her head sadly. “They weren’t what you could call ‘good guys’.”

“Why couldn’t you feed yourself?”

“My wounds were septic. I was a self-harmer, have been most my life. Since... all this, it’s gotten worse and worse, and I ended up cutting deeper than I should. The wounds went bad and I almost died. My ship was on its way to trade with Sighisoara and I don’t remember arriving, but by the time my fever broke they were gone and I was here. In rehab.”

Tetrazzini nodded gravely. “She almost died. An addiction to self-punishment and bad-company that almost proved her end. Very fortunate I found her, very fortunate indeed.”

“But all better now. Infection gone, addiction gone, pain gone. All that’s left is scars.” She rolled up one of her sweater sleeves revealing an arm criss-crossed with a thousand cuts, ranging from tiny splinter sized incisions to long deep gouges. One stood out against the rest, being deeper and fresher than most.

They seemed oddly familiar.

Beth gave the Mariner a couple of seconds to take in the sight, before rolling the sleeve back down. "I'll let the doctor finish showing you around. I would say good luck, but by finding this place, you've already got all the luck in the world." Beth turned and made her way back to the bench where the girl still sat.

"And her?" the Mariner asked, gesturing towards the child. "Another patient? How many do you have?"

"Her? No!" Doctor Tetrazzini laughed. "Good heavens, no. She has no addiction, unless you include her sweet tooth! That's my daughter. Grace, come over here and say hello!"

The name made his lungs seize with a claw-like grip.

Grace.

The girl looked up from the book and reluctantly came to her father's call. Beth retrieved her paperback as they passed, warmly swatting the child on the arm for losing her page.

Tetrazzini chuckled. "I'm so glad we found this place. Being on the move is no way for a child to live."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Three years, round about. Before then we had no home, like most I guess, we wandered."

The Mariner tried to keep up with the conversation, but was still haunted by the ominous name. Surely he shouldn't be surprised to come across it again; after all, names were common. But to come across someone sharing the name

he'd given his first devil? The one whose death was nailed to his conscience?

And then something else puzzled him. When had he named Grace? And when he had, why pick that name above all others?

"Grace, say hello to our new guest."

"Hello," Grace gave a little half-hearted wave and then ran down the path, between some trees, startling a squirrel which broke from the undergrowth.

"Kids," Tetrazzini rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry, she's rather shy with strangers, but once you've been here a week or so, you won't be able to shut her up."

"That's ok," the Mariner mumbled, still mulling over the coincidence and staring at the foliage through which the girl had vanished.

"You asked me how many patients I have. Well, as you can see, my rehab unit appears small, but on the inside its economical with the space. We can house up to five guests at once, though at the moment we only have three. You're the fourth."

"We?"

"Yes, myself and Grace. We run the centre together. The only other patient you haven't met is Donna; she's in the infirmary. "

The Mariner sighed, looking about the grounds with a mixture of content, envy, and the unease of chemical dependency. "You have a wonderful place here, doctor. I can't thank you enough."

“Nonsense.” Tetrazzini put his arm around him and began to lead inside. “Thank me once you’re better. You, the patient, are all that’s important. It is addiction that turns man into beast, and when you’re free of that, you’ll be amazed at what you can achieve.”

The Mariner allowed himself to be led, stomach fluttering with excitement. Perhaps it was his addiction that had dragged him down, stopped him from finding the island he’d been searching for all this time? No wonder every day felt like a curse! He had a disease, an *affliction*; once it was cured he would be free of his sins. Free to start anew.

They passed back into the cool building and into a study. It took a few seconds for the Mariner’s eyes to adjust from the glare of the sun to the shade inside. Finally colours seeped into his vision and the room revealed itself. Like the previous, the study was furnished with comforts the Mariner had only dreamed of. Every surface was clean, every chair cushioned. In the corner was a white humming box that when opened spilled out gloriously cool air.

“We’re going to start your treatment right away,” said Tetrazzini as he reached inside.

“Really?” The Mariner was thinking of that last drink he’d been hoping for. “I thought I might... settle in for a bit before we got going?”

“Nonsense, no time like the present.” And then, to the Mariner’s horror, he saw what the doctor had pulled from the box. A beer. “It’s cold,” Tetrazzini said, seemingly unaware of the torture he was inflicting. “We have a generator here, so there’s electricity to run the lights and cool the fridge. Take it.”

Drops of moisture ran down the glass, mirroring the saliva that flowed in the Mariner's mouth.

"Is this a test? Am I expected to resist already?" The Mariner closed his eyes in misery. Every fibre of his being was screaming for the drink, egging him on to seize the bottle and drain it in an instant. Only then would the pain in his stomach and his head cease.

He began to tremble, and would have continued to if not for the comforting hand he felt placed upon his shoulder.

"Open your eyes my friend. It's no test. We do not teach abstinence here. In fact, it's necessary for your treatment that you *do* drink. First, take this pill." Tetrazzini put the bottle on his desk and pulled a small capsule out his breast pocket. It rattled as he unscrewed the top and shook out a single white pill into his palm.

Still shivering, the Mariner tried to tear his eyes away from the cold beverage. "What is it?"

"An innovation of mine. Blending traditional beta-blockers with Ibogaine extracts. I meant it when I said you need to keep drinking to lose your addiction. It works thus: every time you ever drank alcohol, it reinforced the addiction in your brain. In your *neurons*. It is that connection that needs to be severed. And with these pills it can be. I want you to take one every time you drink. And every time you do, you will lose a little bit more the need to do it again, until one day the addiction will be completely gone." He flexed his hands like a magician disappearing a rabbit.

"And I'll never drink again?"

"You'll never *need* to drink again. That's the beauty of this drug: you can still drink! In fact you could drink yourself silly

every day for twenty years, but if you take this pill every time you do, you'll never become addicted. You'll never have *dependency*. It is addiction, not action, that causes a man to become a beast."

"It sounds too simple."

Tetrazzini laughed. "Yes, yes it does, doesn't it? But the best solutions often are, aren't they? Drink! Drink my friend, you're in good care. Other doctors preach abstinence, but not me. I don't tell my patients to turn their backs on their behaviour or their lives. I tell them to embrace their addiction. Don't run, seize it! Squeeze it! Only when you confront addiction head on will you become free. Confront it and you'll never feel the pain of want or denial ever again. You'll once again be truly alive!"

The beta-blocker felt sour and dry in his throat. The Mariner wasn't bothered though, he washed it down soon after.

Patient Number 0020644

Name: John Doe

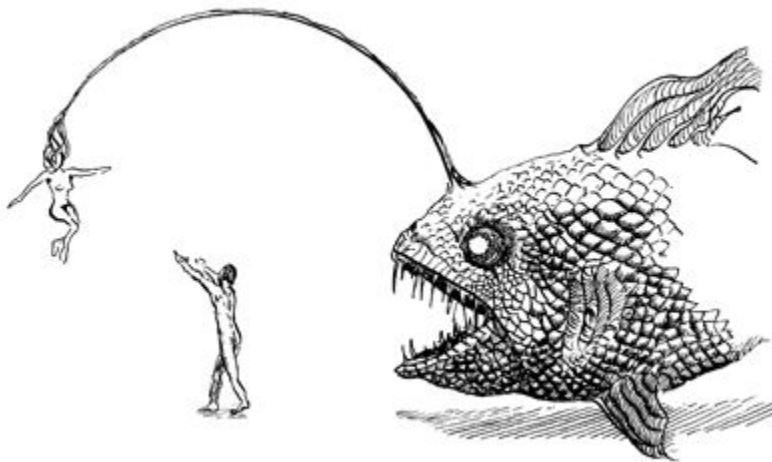
Welcomed the new patient today. As I suspected his problem is alcoholism, and a severe case at that. I don't believe I've seen a case of this disease so advanced, at least mentally. I can only deduce that he found a significant quantity on his journeys to fuel it thus-far. Pity that he must have run out (giving him reason to dock at Sighisoara), otherwise he might have had something to trade, though I maintain payment will not be necessary in his case. I feel partially responsible for his near lynching in town and curing his illness is the least I can do for the man. Besides, alcoholism responds quickly to the treatment, I'm sure this will be an open and shut case.

I have explained the treatment and given him his first dose. As expected, the medication has been well received by his system - no signs of side-effects or illness.

Rebecca seems to have taken kindly to him and I suggested he accompany her into town later to witness self-administration. Hopefully this will reinforce his understanding of how the treatment works. I made sure he had a dose to take if he decides to drink, which I'm sure he will, Rebecca will see to it.

It is a pity that his addiction is so straight forward. He seems a mysterious man and I was hoping for a more complex psychological profile. Sadly, this is not the case. I will have to simply be satisfied with curing him.

T.



15
ADDICTION APLENTY

SIGHISOARA USED NO CURRENCY. GOODS were the only trade worthwhile and no coin could be relied upon to accurately represent their worth. For that reason each player at the

gambling den negotiated for chips at the start of the game. Rebecca had brought along a collection of paper-back books she'd collected. The Mariner watched her argue with the croupier, pushing for higher price tags to be attributed to each. Some she accepted, others she refused to back down on, returning the items to her satchel with a grunt of disappointment.

When she returned to the Mariner, a large collection of chips were clasped in her hand. "There was a time when I was so addicted to the thrill of gambling that I would have accepted any price," she whispered. "They knew this of course and I got ripped off every time. Ass-holes. But you must know what it's like?"

"I must?"

"Of course. Haven't you come across someone who'd become aware of your addiction and taken advantage of it? Someone who saw your weakness and exploited all you were worth?"

The Mariner had. Absinth Alcott had made promises of limitless alcohol, littered about the ocean in secret stashes known only to him. The Mariner also remembered how little of Absinth the devils had left behind.

The chips Rebecca had been given were misshapen coins of various sizes, each battered, chipped and twisted. Some were small and bright, reflecting the candlelight like a thief's dream. Others were large dull and tarnished, the once noble visages now no more than framed potatoes. Letters of languages he recognised (and some he didn't), were crammed around the rims denoting worth that no longer applied. Only one similarity united the coins into two categories: some were silver and some were bronze.

Rebecca explained that each silver coin represented five of the bronze.

A few of those bronze coins were thrown into a small pot on the far side of the table and drinks were hastily placed on in front of the two visitors. Whiskey. Perfect.

The Mariner reached out an eager hand, but Rebecca seized his wrist.

“Medication first; otherwise all this is pointless.”

He nodded and relaxed, allowing his arm to go limp and settle beside the glass. Violent compulsion to throw her aside and drain every receptacle was put on hold.

Rebecca rooted about in her satchel, a frown upon her face. The Mariner watched, enjoying the way her hair, mostly held back behind her head, surrendered a few strands to tumble forward and frame her delicate face.

With satisfaction, Rebecca found the small tin containing the beta-blockers. She popped the lid off and shook out two pills: one for her, one for him. He held out his hand, upturned.

“Strange isn’t it?” Her rhetorical question was asked as she placed the small white pill upon the spot in his palm where the lines intersected. “That something so small and can turn our whole world around.”

Rebecca swiftly knocked back her pill and chased it with a swig. A slight grimace indicated that she didn’t like the faint bitter taste either, but it soon passed and then it was his turn.

Something made him hesitate for a moment, no doubt some lingering demon inside, but it was easily quashed. This was the road to freedom, nothing would stop him taking it, and besides, who would ever have thought the road could be so pleasurable?

The Mariner placed the bitter pill on his tongue and washed it down with whiskey. The burning liquid felt wonderful to his tired and raw throat. Only his stomach gave any complaint, but even that was weak.

“So, now we just drink?” he asked, still not fully believing the treatment could be so easy.

“You drink, I gamble. Different addictions, same treatment. Wonderfully simple isn’t it?”

“How long have you been doing this? Tetrazzini’s treatment, I mean, not the gambling.”

“Not long. It starts to work very quickly. You may find yourself losing your compulsion after just a few weeks. Although you will forever be taking these pills whenever you drink, just as I do whenever I gamble, but that’s a small price to pay isn’t it?”

“If I lose the addiction, I don’t think I’ll ever drink again.”

“Possibly, but I don’t think the doctor would advise that. It’s best you drink every so often with a pill. That way the addiction can never regrow and take control. For instance, I still enjoy gambling, and will make sure I do it every few weeks or so, but I’ll never again lose everything down to the clothes on my back chasing the thrill of a win.”

Despite his sexual desire to see Rebecca stripped of clothing, the Mariner was pleased for her. She was clearly on

the road to recovery. In a few weeks, would he be in same place, confidently guiding another addict towards the light?

Several other players had taken their respective places around the table, whilst in the shadowy recesses of the room others drank, nursing spirits and private grievances. Some were gambling too, but in private matches between old rivals; only in the central game could a stranger place a bet. The round table was lit up like a bear pit, a stage for the evening's entertainment.

"I'm going to sit at the side-lines," he muttered as Rebecca arranged her chips into piles.

"No, stay, you'll want to be up close for the action." Although she clearly meant it, Rebecca sounded distracted, her mind already more on the game ahead than her companion.

"No, it's ok. I wouldn't know what you were doing anyway. Never played." The Mariner picked up his glass and made his way to an empty corner and felt instantly more comfortable in the darkness. He wore it as a warm coat caressing his shoulders. He yawned, feeling suddenly weary and eye-heavy. They began to close, focusing his attention solely on the sounds of glasses clinking, soft chatter and the metal poker chips as they were pushed around the table. Slowly these sounds faded and merged into one, until even that couldn't be heard.

He'd washed, eaten and was now in the process of getting drunk. Times were good. And so was sleep.

When the Mariner awoke, probably not long later, the poker session was in full swing and there were several more drinks laid out for him in a neat line. He sat up in his chair, making the legs screech on the stone floor. Prompted by the sound,

Rebecca looked in his direction and saw he'd awoken. She grinned and winked before turning back to the table and throwing another disk. The Mariner took her gesture as it was meant: she'd ordered the drinks, paid for by her winnings. Let them both enjoy their vice. The real tab was picked up by the good doctor on top of the hill.

In a silent salute, the Mariner downed a second and third shot of whiskey, slowing to enjoy the scent of the fourth. The fumes filled his nostrils, tickling the sensitive nerves within.

The thought of his nose oddly made him think of his devils back aboard the Neptune. Were their noses pointing in his direction? he wondered. Their snouts peering into the dark night air? How long would they wait before they sought food of their own?

The Mariner downed the fourth whiskey. Fuck those little bastards. They were like his addiction, something he'd put up with far too long. If they starved or got themselves shot, that was their own damn fault, not his. He wasn't going to be their pet any longer.

Rebecca gave the table a celebratory slap and pulled another pile of coins in her direction. It looked like the evening was going well. For her, for him, for the way life sometimes picks up when you least expect it.

The fifth whiskey disappeared through his grinning lips. There was no burn now. The liquid felt as mild as milk. He held the empty glass up and soon had the barman by his side.

"Another glass sir?"

"Whatever my friend can afford."

His waiter crept over to Rebecca and gently shook her from her trance. At first she appeared angry, but the fierceness faded as if adjusting from a dream awoken. She shook her head, said something and then handed the barman a whole handful of coins. He smiled, nodded and scurried back to the bar, returning promptly with a whole bottle of bourbon to set down on the Mariner's table.

"The lady says this is for you."

The Mariner mumbled a thanks and looked to Rebecca. There was no wink this time, her attention was solely upon the game. An uncomfortable notion made him wonder the nature of the gift, was this her way of celebrating greater victories, or was she making sure he wouldn't bother her again?

No matter; time to drink the sixth.

He watched her play poker against four opponents. He was sure there had been more, they must have skulked off as their reserves evaporated. Perhaps they were in the shadows now, watching the game of chance taken as seriously as gladiatorial combat?

In the warmth of the candlelight, Rebecca struck the Mariner as one of the most desirable women he'd ever seen. True there hadn't been many. Not of courting age. But outside fantasy she was above them all. He could see her profile side on, her face the very picture of confidence, green eyes lit up as she calculated the odds. He looked at her body, hidden conservatively in shirt and jeans, yet still her figure could be deduced. Breasts pushed beneath shirt buttons as she stretched. Hips swayed as she danced in her seat.

The Mariner wanted her. It had been a long and lonely time at sea. He thought he'd managed to drink his desire away

for good, but now it was back. Perhaps he had the doctor to thank for that as well?

There was no eighth drink. The seventh would last all night. Gone were the glasses; the Mariner cradled the bottle in his lap, sucking deep as he watched.

After a while he found it easier to imagine fucking her if he closed his eyes. The result was as agreeable as the bourbon. Sordid images danced across his vision and he chuckled at them, coaxing them along. Once again the sounds and smell of the room became distant, a dim shadow behind his fantasy, a sexual playground that had no limits.

But suddenly he was abed. The sexual illusions gone. the images of copulation and sordid union – erased! He was unaware of such things; after all, he was just a boy, afraid and alone.

There was a voice, somewhere in the dark, sounding distant and muffled. He tried to discern the source as he wanted to call them forth from the darkness and speak with them, but for some reason he was silent and immobile. It was then he realised why they sounded so far away; there was something covering his face. Suffocating him.

Raw panic. He had to move, to push back or face death. But his limbs were weak and there was naught to do but wait.

He felt like he was drowning, being dragged deeper and deeper into the ocean. It was a fear he'd often felt in the midst of a storm, when lightning flashed overhead threatening to burn his ship in one quick blaze. The Mariner lived on the sea, and there was only one death suitable for a man like he.

Except none of that was real. It was nonsense.

There weren't monsters or Mindless or empty ships that carried devils.

-Suffocating! I can't breathe!

The world hadn't splintered into a billion pieces adrift in an endless sea.

-Let me go!

He wasn't a Mariner. He was just a boy.

Drowning!

Besides, thought the boy as he spiralled down into the darkness, the Mariner didn't even have a name. So he couldn't possibly be that man, because his name was-

The Mariner's eyes snapped open to the reassuring gloom of the gambling den. The bourbon bottle lay in his lap. At some point it had slipped from his grasp spilling its contents down his leg. He didn't mourn the loss, he'd drunk his fill for the night and then some. The smell, only hours before so welcome and sweet, now seemed rank and rotten. It made him want to hurl, but his body couldn't muster the resolve. Instead a small pocket of bile climbed high up in his throat, just enough to coat his tongue, before skulking moodily back below.

"You think it's about the fucking money?"

An angry voice. With several others growling in agreement. These are what had awoken him from his nightmare. He would thank them, if they were the sort who'd respond well to kind words that made little sense. Perhaps not, instead he

would hold his tongue; there was a drunken meanness in that tone that the Mariner wanted no part of.

“Just take it all, please, I was playing for fun, I don’t even want it.” A woman’s voice. Scared. Threatened.

“So you think you’re above us? Our goods no good?” Another nefarious voice, not as gruff as the first, but slyer. Not the alpha male, but a member of the same pack all-right. A coward suddenly feeling bold.

“Of course they are!” Crying now. The sound of prey cornered by wolves. “But I’d rather we just went our separate ways, and forget this happened at all.” Dead already. “Please, I’m not well, I need to get back to the clinic.”

The fog fell from the Mariner’s drunken head. It was Rebecca! The room swam into focus; the game had gone sour and her opponents had cornered her, four in total. Her back was to the table whilst they stood around, blocking retreat.

Not that retreat looked likely, even if she managed to bolt past them, entrapment seemed certain. The Mariner glanced about the room. Drinking and chatter in the dark recesses had stopped, all eyes were now on the central altercation. Anticipation in the air. They were in a beasts’ den. How had he not seen it before?

Rebecca gathered her chips together in her hands and offered the bounty, though they didn’t even elicit a glance, not even when the coins caught the light and shimmered; cold eyes were too busy sizing up their victim, planning how to violate her first.

The Mariner knew he had to act. The thugs thought he was passed-out, dead-drunk, and that was fine by him. They could go on thinking that until he put a bullet through each of their heads, but he had to be careful. No doubt they would be keeping an eye on him as her accomplice. When he made his move, he had to do it fast and without warning.

In the corner of his eye he could see the barman making his way to the den's front door. Any hope of the large man calling for help or rousing whatever served as the local peace-makers was short-lived. With a well-practised motion he placed a wooden beam across both door panels, sealing the room shut.

"If y'struggle, we'll just fuck y'worse," said the alpha. He stepped forward, closing the gap between her and him, imposing even more with his great height. It made her drop the coins and they scattered across the the floor beneath. None bent down to pick them up; poker chips were no longer the focus of their desire. "And if we can't trust you, we'll have to remove your teeth."

"De-fang the fucking bitch!" cried one of the others, a scrawny weather-beaten rodent of a man. Sniggers came not just from the jackals, but the carrion birds who watched from the side.

"Now that would be a shame." Alpha held out a large hand to take Rebecca's chin, but she pulled away. Shaking, she backed up against the table so hard it juddered momentarily, letting out a screech that echoed off the walls. The sudden noise made her scream and the men pounce, the whole scene suddenly set in motion.

The Mariner moved his hand slowly to his side. He had a gun there, hidden beneath his coat. It was a vicious little device

that could spit out bullets in quick succession, unless it jammed, which it was oft to do. The boy who'd traded him a full case-load had told him they were Mausers, though that seemed a strange name for a gun. Sounded more appropriate for a dog.

Whatever the name, the Mauser might just spew enough bullets to take down the gang and whoever felt gutsy enough to move from the shadows. Did any of them have guns? The Mariner had no idea. The ocean was endless and some he met had never seen a gun, others had them falling out their arse.

A quick punch to the stomach sent Rebecca double, her scream going silent as the wind was knocked from her lungs. Further blows pushed her against the table, her head striking the wooden edge with such force an ugly red gap opened on her forehead.

"Hold her down," Alpha commanded one of his underlings. Both he and a second grabbed Rebecca by the arms and pulled her across the poker table. Face down against the hardwood she once again found her voice and begun to scream. Blood formed a pool in front of her eyes, the gash upon her head making her hair form thick scarlet clumps. Several pairs of hands gripped her trousers and pulled with such force her legs were lifted clear off the ground. Buttons, torn free, dropped to the floor, mingling with the discarded chips. As the garment disappeared down her legs, it revealed pale white skin, eyed lustily by the onlookers.

The Mariner watched as the Alpha pushed both her legs apart, her muscles spasmodic with terror. He had his hand on the Mauser now, it would take less than a second to draw it and put a stop to this horror. The Alpha too reached for his weapon, eyes fixed on Rebecca's buttocks as she struggled

under the gangs grasp. Just like the Mariner, Alpha's was primed and ready to use. He took Rebecca's underwear in hand and tore it to the side. The item didn't fall free completely, but hung around her waist, misshapen and loose. The whole gang watched intently as the Alpha moved his erection between her legs, ready to penetrate.

Now! Whilst they are distracted! No-one will notice. Put the gun to their heads and shoot! If he acted, it may just be in time.

Alpha pushed his hips forward.

Rebecca's scream found new depths of agony.

The Mariner watched as the beast enjoyed himself, goaded on by his accomplices, each relishing the thought of their own turn. Rebecca still screamed, but now through gritted teeth. It was difficult to see the precise expression upon her face through the mask of blood, tears and snot, but the Mariner could guess. It was one he was sure he'd seen before.

Why hadn't he saved her? He'd wanted to, what was happening was monstrous, a crime beyond comprehension, but he'd been unable to act. Was it the drink? Could he blame the bourbon? No, that would be a lie. Some part of him had wanted to put a stop to the rape, but another part, a far bigger part, had wanted to watch. The same part that now enjoyed the show, just one of many other leering gargoyles.

With a grunt the Alpha ejaculated, his body going rigid as he emptied himself inside her. The act seemed to jolt the Mariner into action. Unnoticed, he stood, striding forwards, closing the gap. Alpha's sweaty head only turned slightly when the cold barrel was gently placed against it.

The gun did not jam. Six quick blasts sent hot lead through the heads and throats of each member of the pack, blood showering the bar behind in wide crimson arcs. The flashes of the gun lit up the room, showing seedy faces the Mariner was sure had looked just like his own.

Shocked silence descended upon the den, broken only by a vague murmuring from one of Rebecca's rapists. He lay on the floor, the top of his head broken open by a passing bullet, and muttered senselessly as his life departed. Visions unknown to the rest haunted the dying man's vision as his eyes read invisible books.

Using his free hand the Mariner pulled Rebecca up against his chest, trying to support her limp body. He swung the gun wildly, making it clear he wouldn't tolerate any movement. His action served another purpose too, it kept his crotch away from the girl, afraid the hardness hidden there would give away his darkness inside.

"Open that fucking door," the Mariner growled at the barman, who raised his arms in surrender. He trembled, but made no move towards to exit. The Mariner, in no mood to be resisted, shot the man in the face. His body, head caved in where the nose used to be, jolted back till it hit the wall and then slowly slid to the ground, twitching erratically.

"You," the Mariner said, pointing the Mauser at another shadowy spectator. "Open it."

Guilt followed Jesus as wolves do the lame. He had failed Judas. Instead of finding forgiveness, as his own preaching taught, Jesus had succumbed to revenge. He needed to repent.

The Road Messiah no more, Jesus fell onto his knees and asked God for guidance. He had travelled the world

preaching and he had travelled the world punishing, and neither had saved mankind from its own wickedness. Neither had saved him.

But God didn't answer.

So Jesus boarded a small rowing boat and took himself out to sea. For forty days and forty nights Jesus rode the waves without food nor drink, hoping to be granted the sight to save his fellow man.

It was during this time the Devil came to tempt Jesus.

"Jesus. You've been ten days out at sea. Are you not hungry? Let me feed you."

"No," said Jesus. "I will eat when God wills me. Not you."

"Jesus. It has been twenty days out at sea. Are you not thirsty? Let me refresh you."

"No," said Jesus. "I will drink when God wills me. Not you."

"Jesus. It has been thirty days out at sea. Is there nothing you desire? I can give you anything, any yearning born of heart, guts, or loins. See what I bring you?"

And then the Devil showed Jesus a great many sights designed to lure him away from his rowing boat and into the depths, but Jesus refused them all.

"Devil, leave me be. I do not want your promises. They do not convince me. I do not want your bribes. They do not tempt me. I do not want your love. It does not warm me. Only God's forgiveness will make me leave this boat."

On the fortieth day Jesus still had not received God's forgiveness nor his guidance. "I have not suffered enough," he declared to the heavens. Taking a knife from his pouch, Jesus plunged it through both feet and both palms, mirroring his disciples' wounds. Blood flowed freely from the cuts and as the first drop hit the ocean the sky turned dark.

"Why has my Son's blood been spilt?" God's voice was great and his fury sent tsunami's in all directions.

"Father," cried Jesus. "I have failed you, failed my disciples and failed my people. I am sorry. But I have suffered in this boat for forty days and forty nights, yet still you will not forgive me!"

"But Son," spoke God, his anger quickly waning. "I was waiting for you to forgive yourself."

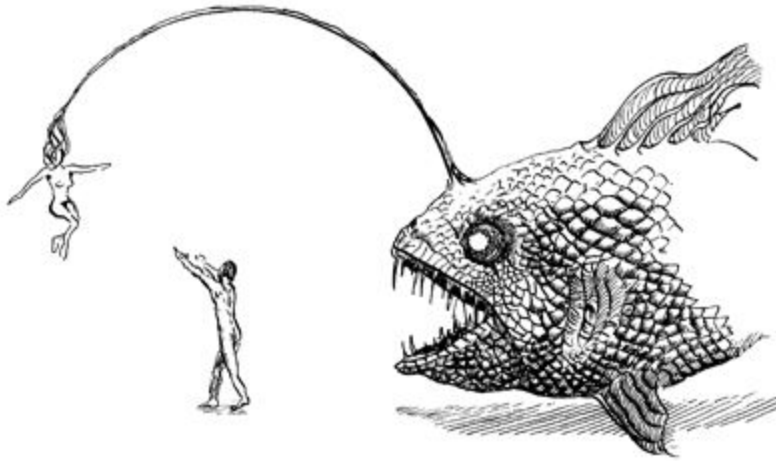
And then Jesus realised he'd forgotten his first teaching, forgiveness comes from within.

With this wisdom he forgave himself, then he forgave the Devil for his temptation (though the Devil hated this act and resented him for it), and so finally his Father was able to give him the forgiveness he so desperately desired.

"Now will you save my people, Father?"

"No Jesus, but I shall tell you what to do."

- The Shattered Testament by The Reverend McConnell



16

REHAB BEGINS

“HOW LONG HAVE YOU HAD these dreams?” Tetrazzini asked, showing not a trace of guilt at using the cliché.

The Mariner shifted uneasily, despite sitting in an astonishingly comfortable chair. The scrutiny reminded him bitterly of sharing a cigarette with Absinth Alcott, a memory he loathed to recall.

“I don’t know. Years? I don’t have a way of keeping time.”

“Oh come now,” dismissed the doctor. “We have the only mechanism to measure time we could ever need at our disposal: the sun. Day and night. What’s to stop you noting down every time the sun sets? What you don’t know are *dates*, but the amount of time passing is easy to assess. You just don’t want to.”

The Mariner was puzzled. “Why wouldn’t I want to know how much time has passed?”

"I don't know." Dr Tetrizzini smiled and stared intently at the Mariner. Outside, the sun blessed the town with another cheerful day, as if eager to put the nastiness of the night before to distant memory. Small songbirds joined the plot, dancing amidst the trees, singing joyfully as if no horrors had occurred.

"Tell me what happens in this dream."

The Mariner hesitated for a moment, vulnerable. "I dream I'm a boy in my parents' bed. Only my father isn't there, it's just my mother, and she's upset."

"Why is she upset?"

"I don't know."

The songbirds suddenly scattered as Grace ran through the garden, hair an earthy blur passing the window. It distracted the Mariner briefly, and he blinked rapidly as he tried to keep focus.

"I think she's disappointed with me."

"Why?"

The Mariner shook his head, unable to answer. Tetrizzini persevered. "What happens next?"

"She wants me to be quiet, I'm breathing too noisily. So she places a pillow over my face."

"That must be very frightening."

"It is, I can't breathe."

"Do you struggle?"

"I'm afraid to. Instead I wait and hope that she realises for herself that she's being too forceful. I hope she takes the pillow off."

"Does she?"

"Eventually."

The doctor's face was solemn and serious. "Is she trying to kill you?"

"Does it matter? It's just a dream."

Tetrazzini leaned back in his chair and flicked through his notebook, making a theatrical gesture of checking previous notes.

"You said earlier that you can't remember beyond a certain point in your history, a relatively *recent* point?" He scanned the words written before him. "You awoke upon your boat with a sense of purpose, but no knowledge of who you were and how you got there."

"Yes."

"My friend, is it possible that this dream is actually a memory from your life before this incident, this 'rebirth' upon your boat?"

"Why would the memory only come to me in dreams? Why don't I recall anything else?"

"Trauma perhaps? Damage done to the brain from chemical abuse? We'll get to the cause eventually, but first I want to press upon you something that I think is quite remarkable."

Tetrazzini leaned forward and licked his lips. Suddenly the dispassionate veneer fell away to one of effusive excitement.

“I’ve met many people who’ve forgotten things. Sometimes they’re small: song lyrics, recipes, spellings, flag colours. Other times the missing segments can be vast chunks, whole areas of their past gone, totally erased! And I’ve found, through bitter experience, it’s best not to push them too hard to remember what they’ve lost. I can see from your face you know what I’m talking about.”

The Mariner did, Tetrazzini was talking about the Mindless. He nodded confirmation, but didn’t speak.

“But here I have you, a man with no memories of the world before at all. And not only are you without violence, but you’ve remembered something. A memory has come back!”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Tetrazzini shook his head, genuinely enthused by the mystery and grinning from ear to ear. “But if we can unlock the reasons for this early memory forcing a return into your mind, then perhaps we can understand where people’s memories have been disappearing to, and restore each and every one!”

Flinching, the Mariner’s face darkened, defences thrown hastily up. “I don’t want more memories!”

“My friend, there’s nothing to be afraid of. Memories are shadows, imprints of a time, a situation, a circumstance that no longer exists. We are in control of our memories, not the other way around.”

The patient’s eyes narrowed, suspicious of the concept he struggled to grasp.

“Let me give you an example. This supposed memory of yours, it bothers you, yes? But it could be that you’ve distorted it, changed it, built upon it. After all, you *were* just a boy. For all you know it is entirely fictional, there’s no way to verify such an occurrence.” He snapped his fingers in the air. “Do me a favour and replay the scene in your head.”

The Mariner closed his eyes and did as the doctor asked, recalling the dream.

“Now remember, this is *your* mind, *you* are in control. I want you to dress your mother in a silly rabbit suit.”

“What?”

“A big pink rabbit suit, and she’s not angry or upset: she’s giggling.”

The Mariner tried. It felt silly, but he could just about do it.

“Now instead of a pillow she’s placing over your face, its a big fluffy mask, so you’ll look like a silly rabbit too.”

The Mariner opened his eyes, eyebrows raised in cynicism. “But that’s not how the dream goes. That’s not how it went.”

“But that’s the point,” Tetrazzini insisted. “It *isn’t*. Whatever happened, whatever sad events took place between a boy and his mother, it isn’t happening now. It doesn’t exist anywhere but *here*.” He tapped a finger on the Mariner’s skull. “And if that’s the only place it exists, then what’s to stop you changing it?”

“I... think I understand.”

“We may well employ that tactic, once we understand where this memory came from.”

The Mariner paused, ingesting the technique. "And you said I could have made it up?"

"It's a possibility."

"I see." A lie, the Mariner didn't understand at all. He was more perplexed about the dream than when they'd begun.

"In this dream, where do you think your father is?"

The Mariner shrugged, he'd never given it much thought. "Just away."

"You said you made friends with a man named Alcott, many years your senior."

"That's right."

"Would you say he was a good man?"

The Mariner remembered Absinth Alcott: his selfishness, his ruthless disregard for others. He also remembered feeding him to the devils.

"No."

"And yet when you told me you parted ways, you looked sad."

"I was. I am. Alcott was," the Mariner struggled for an accurate word. "A friend."

"A 'friend' who threatened your life and treated you as a means to an end?"

The Mariner chose not to respond.

“And now you’re here, putting your faith in me, another man more advanced in years than your own. Do you not think it strange that you be so quick to trust us both?”

“You’re not to be trusted?”

Tetrazzini laughed. “Of course I am. But what I’m trying to point out to you is your desire for a father figure. Someone to fill the void so obviously apparent in these dreams of yours, someone to protect you from this dangerous matriarch. And when you fail to find a father to fill the void, you seek out alcohol to do the job instead.”

The Mariner frowned. “So if I find my father... my addiction will go away?”

“No, not at all. I’m just theorising about what caused you to drink so much, that’s all. The addiction was caused by repetitive action and a reward function. The pills will treat that.” He sighed and put his notes on the floor. “I think that’s enough for today’s session. Well done, I think we covered a lot of ground and even made some progress, don’t you think?”

The Mariner stood, looking sheepish in his uncertainty. “I guess so.”

Matching the Mariner, Tetrazzini rose and put his hand on the sailor’s shoulder to stop him leaving.

“Before you go, I wanted to thank you again for what you did for Rebecca. She was very lucky you woke up at that moment, otherwise...” The doctor looked to the floor, unable to voice the possible further horrors that could have taken place. “I have no doubt she owes you her life.”

You watched her.

Guilt and remorse made the Mariner's voice hollow. "I only wish I could have..."

Raped her myself.

"...woken up sooner."

An expression the Mariner couldn't decipher flickered across the doctor's face and then was gone. Had he seen the guilt? Had he sensed the Mariner's sin?

"Don't beat yourself up about it, you did the best you could under the circumstances. I take full responsibility, I shouldn't have allowed you both into town without further supervision. Sighisoara is a small community, but just as dangerous as any other in this broken world." Tetrazzini's bitter admission of his own remorse seemed genuine; the colour drained from his face as he spoke, ageing him before the Mariner's eyes. "What happened? Where did it all go?"

The Mariner had no answer to give, and after sharing a moment of silence together the doctor shook himself from his reverie and opened a door leading to the garden, gesturing he should leave.

Outside, the air was warm, though not as bright as the Mariner had been led to believe from staring out the window. The sun was heavy in the sky, its reflection on the ocean providing the golden glow.

The Mariner heard Tetrazzini close the door, leaving him alone with the peaceful sounds of the birds as they collected their supper of insects. Somewhere in the foliage he could hear the swift rat-a-tat-tat of a woodpecker. A glimmer of white and red amongst the brown bark hinted at its whereabouts.

“Do you remember the zoo?”

The voice surprised him, he'd completely forgotten that Grace was playing outside. She stood not far off with her back to him, staring out at sea through a gap in the trees.

It was the first time they'd spoken, and a certain amount of superstition about her name still lingered in his mind. Reluctant to step closer, he stayed put.

“A ‘zoo’?”

Disappointed. “No-one ever remembers. It used to be over there.” She pointed to Sighisoara's western side. “I liked the monkeys.”

“What happened to it?”

“One day a crack appeared between the zoo and us,” she explained. “It filled with water, growing wider each day and the zoo got further away. Sometimes we'd get in a rowing boat and visit it, but the further away it got, the less people thought about it. One day it was just a teeny speck in the distance and then – gone.” She turned to look at him and in that moment he realised there was nothing supernatural about this girl, no strange presence bestowed by a magical name, nothing to be fearful of, she was merely child, and a lonely one at that. “Now no-one remembers it at all.”

“Nobody?”

Grace bit her lip and looked back to the sea. “I once tried to get Miss Taylor to remember. She used to bring us milk. I told her all about it, the animals, the statues, everything. I even described a day we spent feeding the monkeys together.”

“And she still didn't remember?”

“No. She got mad. *Really* mad.”

The woodpecker stopped his incessant hammering and the woodland fell silent. Even the noises from the town below failed to reach the pair. It were as if the whole world between them and the horizon has momentarily disappeared.

“What happened?”

“She died. They had to shoot her.”

“I’m sorry.”

The girl shrugged, terrible acceptance in one so young. “It happens every now and then. People get angry and never calm down. I haven’t tried asking about the zoo since.”

“Until you asked me. Why?”

“I overheard you talking about a memory that came back.”

Sudden shame made the Mariner sick, the intrusion of privacy flaring anger. “What else did you hear?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Not much. Didn’t seem right to listen. I don’t eavesdrop.”

The Mariner turned to leave, embarrassed to share the company of the curious child any longer, but Grace stopped him.

“Is that your boat?” She pointed to the Neptune, impressive even at this distance.

“Yes it is.”

“My friend Donna is on her way to look at it.”

“Who’s Donna?”

“She’s a patient here, we’re trying to cure her.”

“I see.”

“She likes to burn things.”

Patient Number 0020644

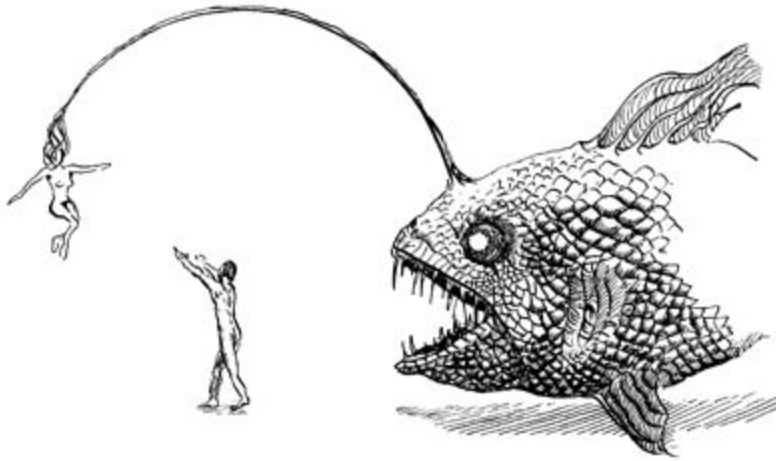
Name: John Doe

I initially suspected that this man held a unique quality, and this has proven to be the case. He complains of a memory intruding into his dreams, one that consists of his mother attempting to smother him as a child. This rediscovered memory makes him more important than any patient I’ve ever admitted.

If my theory about a widespread degenerative brain disorder is correct, then this man must have a unique physiology that is either immune to the detrimental effects or has an immune system capable of repelling the infection. If I can understand why he regains lost memories whilst the rest of us lose chunks for seemingly no reason, then perhaps I can isolate the cause and thus discover the cure.

It is now of vital importance that his addiction is promptly cured so we may concentrate on this new pressing matter. My conviction is that this can be achieved within a matter of weeks. During this time it will be my duty to persuade him to stay and help me complete these essential studies.

T.



17 NEPTUNE

BEFORE THE WORLD CHANGED, ANDY Schiff trained dogs for the Metropolitan Police. Not being 'one of the boys', he'd never made an arrest in his life, never wrestled a criminal to the ground with his bare hands, never even uttered the words "you're nicked", yet still he considered himself one of the Good Guys. Not one of the lads, but still part of the Justice Machine. This was because without him, his colleagues would lack the spaniels to find drugs or German shepherds to drag down dangerous fugitives. And, in a strange way, he felt the dogs understood this too. Often he'd look into their eyes and feel they knew the mighty duty bestowed on both beast and man. *You're doing a good job Andy*, the brown eyes would say. *Keep it up*.

Yes, Schiff had been assured of his place in life and it was firmly on the side of the Law.

So strange that now, years – possibly even a lifetime – later, he would find himself within a gang, several men strong, on

their way to commit an act of arson and, if they were lucky, a murder too.

The escalation of violence had happened within minutes. What had first looked like a run-of-the-mill rape (when had he started thinking of them in those terms?) had suddenly turned into a blood-bath leaving several of his close friends dead.

Well, not so much 'close friends', but mutual beneficiaries. Partners in crime. And if they could be killed, just like that, then who was safe?

"That's his ship up there," he hissed at his two colleagues as they made their way along the dock, keeping to the shadows cast by the setting sun. "He'll come running as soon as we start the fire." The others muttered their agreement. It was unanimously decided that they needed to lure him away from the doctor's lodgings. Whilst being a bit strange, Tetrazzini was popular amongst the people of Sighisoara and storming up there to take the criminal by force would lose them medical privileges. Better to set a trap and let the monster come sniffing.

Schiff was looking forward to seeing the Mariner hang for what he'd done. Rumours were abound that not only was he a murderer, but a grave robber and arsonist too. One could say that torching his boat was justice for the arson, as was a hanging for the murder. Something else would need to be thought of to pay for the robbed grave. Schiff looked forward to coming up with something particularly gruesome to do to the man's corpse.

For a moment a small part of Schiff registered moral doubt over what he was about to do. This Mariner deserved it, yes, but did this sort of revenge make Schiff one of the Good

Guys? He dismissed the objection. There was no law in Sighisoara. No law anywhere any-more. Not since the Shattering, or whatever it was the reverend called it. Schiff didn't remember a dramatic holy event, a curse by God as McConnell insisted it had been. It was more of a foggy shift of the mind, a gradual separation of everything, from communication and friendships to nations and lands. But he supposed 'Shattering' was as good a word as any.

They neared the boat and, for the first time since their afternoon drinking binge, felt apprehension. The Neptune loomed large and dark against the reddening sky, its mast more like an enormous tombstone than the support for a sail.

You could say it's the sail's skeleton. Morbid. Just what the hell was getting into him?

Schiff pulled a large bottle of brandy out of his satchel and took a deep drink, hoping for courage. The other two disapproved, but then submitted to temptation and drank as well. It was not the act of drinking that caused them to view him so, but the source from which he supped. Brandy was the fuel they aimed to set the Neptune alight, and the three men recklessly drained their reserves.

"Come, let's be quick about it." Schiff boarded the ship first, affording himself a quick glance back along the dock, making a mental plan of where they would hide and lay a trap.

The Neptune was silent apart from the occasional creak of its wooden body. The sun bathed the three faces in a red glow that ended at their necks. Three bloody severed heads. He shook his to dislodge the thought. Best to focus and get the job done. This Mariner was a monster. Schiff would be

infinitely more relaxed when his body twitched on the end of a rope.

“We do it here?”

Schiff looked around. His accomplices were feeling the nerves too, they hopped from foot to foot as though they each carried a full bladder. He shared their desire, it was tempting to get the deed over with, but they couldn't afford to mess it up through haste.

“Let's get below deck to set it, we don't want to be spotted too soon.”

The three crept their way through a large oak door and down a set of stairs. Schiff felt right about what they were doing. This was all hunky-dory. For now the sun would mask their fire, but soon it would lower its head below the horizon and any flames would be easy to spot. Down here though, the fire would feed and grow strong, secret until too late. That was using his head. Oh yes. Like a Good Policeman should.

“Here?”

“No,” said Schiff. “A little further.”

For some reason Schiff was becoming excited. Earlier fears were sent into retreat as his curiosity emboldened. Where had this stranger acquired such a large ship? And how on earth did he sail it? Perhaps there were secrets to be found in these dark halls?

“Andy? *Andy?*” hissed Jeb, the more nervous of the two.

“What?” Schiff snapped.

“Here? Please?”

There was no reason not to, but still Schiff refused. "Just a little further," he whispered and inched them to a door and the end of the hallway.

So far, illumination had been supplied by the open door at the top of the stairs. Now, however, they saw light spilling out from underneath the portal they approached. Was he here? Would they be saved the trouble of luring him after all?

Schiff put his head to the door and inched it open to gaze inside.

A woman he vaguely recognised was inside, illuminated by a small lamp. At first he thought her an effeminate male for no hair grew upon her head, but the sight of scars covering her scalp and body gave the truth. She was one of Tetrizzini's patients. Perhaps they were all in cahoots together?

She stood with a book open in her hands as if about to read aloud to an audience, but then with hasty movement tore the pages out. Once removed, each were scrunched up and thrown into a far corner. Schiff watched curiously whilst the others tugged and pulled at his coat, eager to observe for themselves,

With the book stripped, the woman knelt to retrieve a plastic bottle and as she poured the contents over the torn pages her motive became clear. She was going to set a fire. She aimed to do exactly as they did! The smell of paraffin hit his nose, forcing him to recoil. Perhaps they should get moving? There was a hunger in this woman's eyes he did not like. Not one bit.

And suddenly a sound took him back beyond the Shattering, before this life of grime. Like the savoury smell of cinema popcorn or the soundtrack to a virginity painfully lost, his

mind was transported to an earlier time by the soft patter of paws. They were not the paws of a large dog, certainly not the German shepherds that he'd most commonly trained. No, these were the tread of a smaller beast, a young springer spaniel or terrier.

Schiff smiled at the sound, a feeling of nobility swelling within. He remembered how happy the animals had been when given a treat, how proud he'd felt in return with each completed task. When news reached his ears that one of his pets had unearthed a set of dangerous explosives, he'd felt a part of a wide and honourable plan.

So strange that now, sometime later, everything he did felt grubby. The nostalgic smile faltered. What would those brown eyes say now?

Jeb began to scream. It was a brief emphatic yowl of surprise, cut short into harsh gurgles, but in the confines of the tight hallway it was all that was needed. Schiff bolted forward, pushing the door open, instinct driving him forward.

The bald woman jumped in surprise and bobbed her head, choking on something midway through swallowing. She closed her eyes into slits until the airway was forced clear, then let out a long-overdue scream of her own. But it was not the dishevelled Schiff, gruff and untoward, that held her gaze, but the dark aperture from where he'd come.

Unable to follow, his two companions remained in the shadows. Jeb had screamed, but his brother hadn't had the chance. Small furry bodies scrabbled over each of them, biting and snapping, tearing flesh in large chunks. His brother lay motionless on the floor, but Jeb still fought back, albeit without a throat. One of the dogs had torn it out. An

apron of blood coated his shirt, a grizzly sandwich-board advertising the passing of his life.

“What are they?” the bald woman cried, reaching for her lamp as if it were a weapon she might use to ward off the beasts.

“Dogs,” said Schiff as he pressed his back against the far wall. “My dogs have come for me!” He watched with growing despair as his gang-mate fell to the ground, a beast clinging to his back, gorging itself on his flesh.

The pyromaniac pushed closer to him. At first he thought she sought comfort and gladly welcomed the touch, but as she threw her lamp onto the pile of papers he realised too late that she was distancing herself from the bonfire she’d prepared.

The inferno erupted as the glass case shattered, fire meeting fuel.

“You stupid fucking bitch!” he screamed, scrabbling away, eyes flicking between the demons and the flames. As yet, the dogs were enthralled by their recent kills; that could theoretically last, but to escape the fire he would have to dash past them, risking their hungry consideration.

“Ohfuckohfuckohfuck!” he repeated under his breath. Already his eyes were beginning to sting. One of the devils looked up at him, its own beady black pearls seeming to glow in the firelight. It held him in its gaze whilst chewing on a stringy clump of Jeb’s muscle.

You’re not one of the good guys now, the eyes seemed to say. Far from it my old friend. Far from it.

Meeting the monster's gaze weakened Schiff further and he closed his lids to blot out the horror. "I'm sorrysorrysorrySORRY!"

This was it: Hell. When the world had fallen apart and he'd found himself shipwrecked on this god-awful settlement he'd thought he'd found it. But McConnell was right: Sighisoara was not Hell. Hell was hot.

With the thought of being either burnt or eaten alive ripe in his mind, Schiff rose to his shaky feet. He had to run for it, past the bodies of his friends, past those demon dogs and then up the stairs. From there he'd throw himself overboard into the safety of the open ocean. Cool water. Salty safety. Fuck revenge against this 'Mariner' fellow, *death* wasn't worth it. Revenge? Pah! He hadn't even *liked* the men the stranger had killed. Fuck 'em all! He wanted to live!

Schiff staggered forward like an animated scarecrow, limbs stiff and uncertain, heat at his back galvanising him into motion. Just a quick dash and jump would do it, the dogs were small, no more than misshapen terriers really. He could do it.

He *could*.

Schiff ran the short distance and jumped through the doorway. Too high. He smacked his head on the ceiling sending his vision into sparkling darkness. Something wet and slippery met his foot as he landed sending him skidding forward, collapsing into a heap upon the stairs.

Weeping in both pain and fear, Schiff crawled the ascent, sure any moment he'd feel tiny teeth upon the nape of his neck. The rising heat seemed to lift his body like the smouldering remains of kindling. Fresh air awaited, a

heavenly promise that propelled him onwards and upwards, towards the open door and then the Neptune's top deck.

Coughing and wailing, Schiff tumbled through the doorway, once again under the sky, a presence he'd never fully appreciated before. Well he'd never make that mistake again. He'd prize it, he'd worship it: cool, clean air. It filled his lungs, soothing the scorched sensation within, and as he lay prone across the deck he sucked in huge healing gasps.

Schiff began to laugh. He'd seen Hell and escaped! A second chance had been given. From now on, everything would change. No more theft. No more fights. No more rapes. He was a changed man, a *police*-man, and he would strive to be a Good Guy once more. Those dogs would be proud.

The sound of a whip cracking against flesh stopped his laugh as it began, his throat clamping shut like a startled sphincter. A horrible moan of pain followed, though it was cut short by a second terrible *thwack*.

Schiff slowly raised his shaky head and looked at the scene about him.

If he'd witnessed the gates of Hell within the Neptune's belly, then rather than flee from it as he'd hoped, he'd tumbled through. All about him people were tortured. Some were flogged, the skin on their backs sliding off like film upon hot milk, clumps clinging to the leather chord as it rose for another pass. Others were having ropes put around their necks, eyes bulging as the nooses tightened. One man's face was repeatedly beaten with a thick wooden stick. Two pained eyes roved wildly above the mush that once was his nose, mouth and chin.

The violence wasn't just intended to inflict pain upon the victims, acts of humiliation and degradation were indulged

with similar vigour. One man was urinated upon by three laughing tormentors, whilst behind a woman was raped by an equally distraught victim, forced into the act by spectators who lashed at him when they thought his thrusts lacked the cruelty they intended. They laughed and jeered, dark smiles beneath soulless eyes.

Where had they come from? Was he dead? Was that it?

Schiff tried to stand amongst the carnage, but found he could not. It was too horrible, too nauseating. Everywhere he looked something terrible was taking place, some act designed to reduce man to vermin. None returned his horrified stare, so consumed in their own activities the sight of one terrified man must have been inconsequential.

And then he saw him. The Mariner. The man he'd come to kill. He was on the floor, naked with a redhead, rutting as if their life depended upon it. However, all Schiff's previous intentions were gone. He had no desire to kill the stranger, just to escape, just to feel that cool water he'd promised himself moments before.

Schiff looked up from the naked couple, one scene amongst many, and into the eyes of the Mariner once more. He blinked and looked again. There were two of them, one on the floor fornicating, the other standing in the centre of the carnage, watching, eyes wide and filled with just as much horror as Schiff's.

"What have you done? What is this?" Schiff asked, but the Mariner didn't seem to notice. He was looking down at himself, face drained of colour.

The rutting Mariner was becoming more and more vigorous, approaching orgasm. The redhead was too, her hips rising to meet him with every thrust. He hoisted himself up upon his

elbows, running his hands about her face. She closed her eyes and welcomed his caresses, gasping as he placed one about her neck and raised the other, curling his hand into a fist.

“No!” the voyeur Mariner wailed, but his words were impotent. The couple couldn’t hear him just as the torturers and victims couldn’t see Schiff.

The rutting Mariner began to strike. One. Twice. Each time flecks of blood would hit his cheek, a snarl of orgasmic joy peppered with red.

Schiff looked at the voyeur Mariner, the *rea*/ Mariner, whose face was a picture of misery and something else. Something beyond the scream. Was it... was it lust?

A growling behind him made Schiff stop studying the man’s expression and look back into the darkness. Beneath the billowing smoke he saw several of the demon dogs crawling up to meet him, their muzzles caked in blood, but their bellies far from empty.

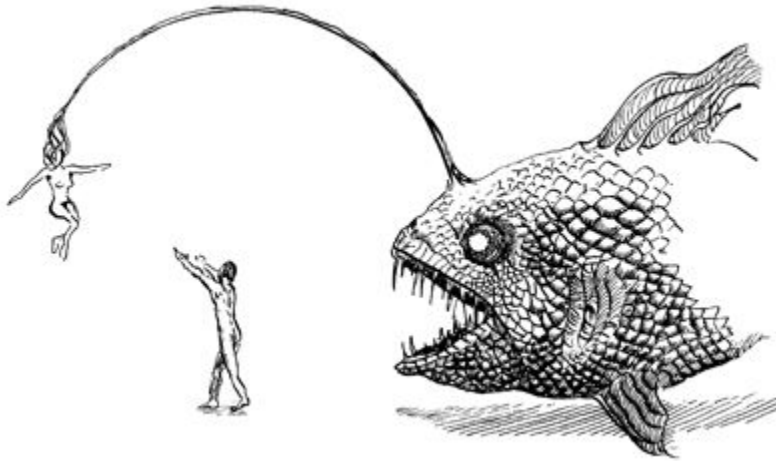
Unable to make himself move he turned once more to the Mariner.

“My past has conjured monsters to punish me.”

The Mariner nodded. “Mine too.”

Schiff closed his eyes and prayed the visions, the fire and the dogs would go away.

Not a single one did.



18 CONFESSION

McCONNELL SMELT THE MARINER LONG before he saw him. The reverend was working alone in his spacious church, a large structure clinging to the scent of freshly cut wood, despite its construction fading to memory and the ever present cloying odour of incense. The pews stretched back generously into the shadows, optimistic considering the small population, and it was from these shadows that the smell of smoke and singed clothing announced the Mariner's arrival. McConnell looked up from his book, a tome he'd busied himself writing during all his time in Sighisoara, and wrinkled his nose.

"Can I help you?" he called into the dark entrance of the church as he rose from his chair, voice echoing back from the rafters.

"There was a sign outside," came the hesitant reply.

"Ah yes, 'futures given, demons driven, all your sins forgiven'," he quoted the charming advert, though his voice

faltered in the empty chamber. "You were right to enter when you read it."

The Mariner stepped out of the dark and into the light cast by McConnell's candles, exhausted and dazed. Smoke still rose from his clothes, despite them being quite cool.

"Is this a holy place?"

"Yes, yes it is. Do you like it? I built the structure myself. When I arrived in Sighisoara I found all the old churches destroyed and I said to myself, this must change. A place needs a mouthpiece through which to hear God's word. Build a Church and write the book. So I did and so I am."

"You are?"

"Writing a book." McConnell indicated a large transcript laid out on a well-lit table. "It's called the Shattered Testament."

"What's it about?"

"Everything," McConnell smiled, the earnestness in his face betraying his youth, a vigour well hidden behind clipped beard, glasses and worry lines. Altogether his face seemed far too crowded for the slender skull on which it sat. "God, Jesus, good and evil. Have you heard of Jesus Haych Christ?"

Before an answer could be given, the Mariner swayed on his feet like a nudged bowling pin and crashed to the floor. McConnell ran over to him and after placing a hand under each arm, managed to hoist the larger man onto one of the pews. McConnell collapsed next to him, breathing deeply from the exertion. His visitor was a wreck, clothes stained and singed, dark red stains that could only be blood spread liberally about his body.

“You look like a cooked rat,” said McConnell. “I’ll get some food. Do me a favour and don’t steal anything.”

The Mariner opened a wry slit of an eye. “You think I’m a thief?”

“Bluntly? Yes. I think you’ve been a thief and many worse things. But that’s fine, we’ll get into that. First, do you understand that I can offer you something far more valuable than any object you can lay a finger upon within this church?”

The Mariner nodded.

“Good, I shall be back shortly.”

McConnell left the Mariner sitting alone in the large hall and dashed into his private kitchen. He gathered bread, cheese and a glass of wine. When he returned, the Mariner ate and drank greedily.

“Who are you?” he asked once the Mariner had finished the meagre meal.

“I don’t know. The doctor says I’ve forgotten because of problems in my past.”

“The doctor? You must mean Tetrzzini. You’re a patient of his?”

The Mariner confirmed whilst scooping up crumbs with his fingers and pouring them into his mouth.

“How, may I ask, is your treatment going?”

He thought for a moment, unsure. “I think it’s going well. He’s got some strange ideas.”

“That he has,” McConnell agreed. “I remember talking to him when he and his daughter first arrived. He specialises in addiction doesn’t he? Well I know a few things about addiction myself.”

“Like what?”

“Ginger biscuits,” he confessed, the mirth a tad too defensive. “They’re my sin and I indulge myself whenever I can. Sadly there isn’t much ginger spice left in Sighisoara so I’m having to wean myself off.”

The Mariner looked at the reverend blankly.

“I suppose that’s not funny to a recovering... drug addict?”

“Alcoholic.”

“Ah, of course. I see a lot of people come and go from Tetrazzini’s rehab centre. Do you want to know what they all have in common when they leave?”

“Sure.”

“They all have their symptoms cured, but not their illness. They are still desperately unhappy people.”

“Then I suppose you’re about to tell me that you can fight the illness?”

McConnell smiled at the cynical challenge. “No, but Jesus can.”

“I’ve already found one cure, I don’t need another.”

“Nonsense!” snapped McConnell. “You saw the sign and you entered. You could have easily gone to Tetrazzini, you can’t

miss his place, just keep climbing up! No, instead you came here, because you know you need something else!”

The Mariner didn’t answer, but instead rose and walked to a small box jutting from the wall. It had a small slit with an arrow pointing inside. Next to it was a drawing of a pair of eyes. He had to stoop to look, but not by much.

Inside was an amateurish tableau of a man and a woman walking across a beach so wide that the sand stretched into the distant horizon. The wife was heavily pregnant and riding a donkey with her bearded husband leading the wretched beast by the nose. A placard beneath explained, ‘Joseph and Mary make their way to Bethlehem’.

“The birth of Jesus,” said McConnell. “I built the miniature theatre to tell the story. The box you’re looking through slides to the right.”

Still keeping his eyes level with the box, the Mariner slid it as instructed and the small wooden frame juddered along a fixed track. One tableau was replaced with another, this time the pair sitting in a wooden barn lined with straw whilst their loyal donkey watched on.

“It changed!”

“It’s a series of compartments arranged in order. Nothing has changed, you’re just moving the viewing piece along to see the next set-piece. I use it to tell the story of Jesus’ birth to children. I remembered how effective films were and wanted to recreate the effect.”

“Films?”

“Moving pictures.”

“Moving pictures?”

“Never-mind.”

The Mariner moved the box further, sliding it four foot across the wall, every six inches or so revealing a different scene from their hidden stage.

“Very clever,” he said, finished.

“You like that, huh?”

“I do. It was lucky that Father Christmas guy turned up and saved them from King Heron.”

McConnell nodded gravely. “Yes it was.”

The Mariner walked back to the pews and sat on the one in front of McConnell, staring at the focal point: an alter built from odd bits of wood and crafted about a central spherical stone. “I don’t know where to begin,” he whispered.

“Start with tonight. How did you arrive at my door?”

“I was warned my ship was the target of an arsonist; one of the patients at the rehab centre likes to burn things. I guess the Neptune was too big a temptation.”

“The Neptune? The ancient ship?”

“Yes, she’s mine.”

“You’re a lucky man, she’s a fine vessel. The largest I’ve seen since the Shattering.”

“The Shattering?”

“We’ll get to that. You say this woman was tempted by the Neptune. Surely if she was being treated for a compulsion to commit arson, she should be prevented from doing so? Watched at all times if necessary.”

“That’s not how Tetrazzini’s theory works. He encourages-” A puzzle-piece fell into place as he suddenly remembered the fire that introduced the doctor. “He believes in curing through medication rather than behaviour.”

“I see.” McConnell said, although it sounded as if he had severe reservations.

“I went to stop her, but when I arrived others were already there. Thieves or vandals, it doesn’t matter; they were dead.”

“Dead? How?”

“Tasmanian devils guard the Neptune for me. Actually it’s not for me at all, they consider it their home and I’m just a tolerated guest.”

“The devils killed-?”

“The intruders, yes.”

“You didn’t instruct them, or train them to do so?”

“No.”

“Then there is no sin. These men were trespassers and thieves. Get rid of these dangerous beasts and put it behind you.”

“The fire-addict was also there, she’d indulged herself before I’d had a chance to intervene.”

“I haven’t heard the fire bell. Were you able to put it out?”

“Yes.” The Mariner chose not to share how he’d quelled the flames, slitting open the men’s bellies and emptying their fluids onto the fire.

“Excellent. I can understand your exhaustion, but you should be pleased. Crisis avoided!”

In the dark gloom of the church, the haunted expression had returned to the Mariner’s battered features. “I saw things. Things that weren’t there.”

“Visions?”

“Yes. Visions. Ghosts. I think they were things that happened on the ship before it was mine.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I’m not, it’s just a feeling. A feeling that that the Neptune was sharing moments of her past with me.”

“What were these visions?”

“Terrible things. Torture. Rape. Murder. Why would I be shown these sights?”

McConnell, sitting behind the Mariner, both surrounded by darkness, felt uneasy. Had this man really seen these things? Or had years at sea hammered a madness into his skull?

“Perhaps God showed you to warn you from straying too far down damnation’s road?”

“If he did, then his message failed.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I enjoyed it.”

McConnell’s heart froze in his chest. This man was mad. Surely only the insane would admit to something like that?

“And I saw something else too.”

“What?” whispered McConnell, not wanted to hear at all.

“I saw myself taking part. Something I did, something terrible.”

I don’t want to know, thought McConnell. Just leave. Get out, get out now! Sweet Jesus save me from this nutter!

“I saw myself kill a woman. I punched her to death as we fucked.” The Mariner turned in his seat to look at the reverend. As his face came into view, McConnell was sure the confessor would be grinning a psychotic bloody smile, but instead his visage bore a simple picture of misery. Sadness and guilt, nothing more. “I enjoyed it. Why would I enjoy a thing like that?”

“Are you sorry?” McConnell asked, feeling a sudden pity for the man despite his confession. “Do you repent?”

“Yes. But I want to know why I am this way.”

“Some whys cannot be answered. Not until Jesus returns and sews the world back together. But if you ask for forgiveness, God will give it. This vision you had: that’s your guilt. Ask Jesus for forgiveness, and then forgive yourself. Only through forgiveness can we be cured our ills, not through pills or time on a therapist’s couch.”

“God would forgive something like that?”

“Anything can be forgiven if truly repented. But it goes both ways. You must forgive anyone who’s wronged you too.”

Now it was the Mariner’s turn to appear afraid. He trembled in his seat. “My mother tried to kill me when I was a boy. I remember her holding a pillow against my face. I couldn’t breathe.” His eyes grew haunted as he recalled the dream. “I couldn’t breathe.”

“Forgive her. You must forgive her.” McConnell placed a hand upon the Mariner’s shoulder, feeling him jump under the touch. “It’s all in the past, there’s no use hanging on. Forgive her, and then forgive yourself.”

Later, once the reverend had said his piece, McConnell watched the Mariner leave and head out into the night. He prayed for the man’s soul until first light, crossing his chest over and over in hope his voice would be heard. And also, in moments of weakness, he made a prayer that this morning would be the last for that strange man with haunted eyes.

God told Jesus to build a boat.

“I have a rowing boat, Father. Will it not do?”

“You do not need a small craft, but a mighty vessel! One capable of housing all those worthy of saving from this sinking world.”

So, at God’s request, Jesus set about building a ship, a mighty wooden ark capable of holding a great host. He laboured for many days and nights, back-breaking work that shredded his already ruined hands, yet he would accept no assistance. This was a task set for him, and him alone.

Upon finishing the boat, Jesus turned skyward. "Who should I invite aboard, my Lord? Who is worthy of salvation?"

"This world is full of sin, my Son. And it must be paid for. I am sorry, but you must sacrifice yourself as a way of paying for these sins, and thus rid mankind of their awful stain."

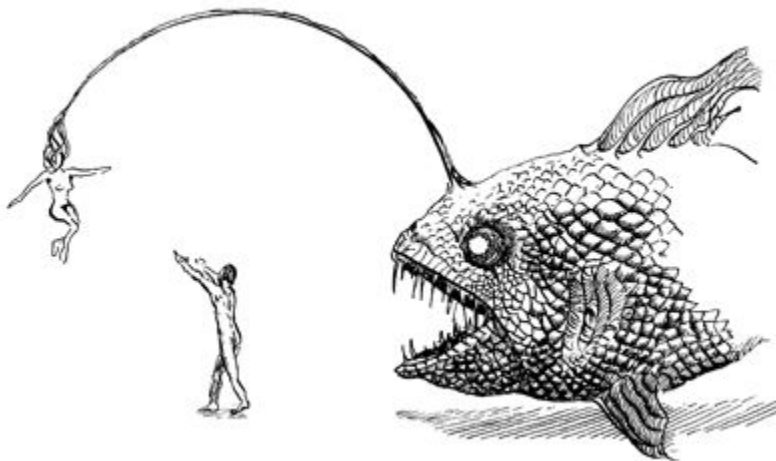
"I must die?" asked Jesus, feeling fear in his heart.

"You must suffer. Suffer terribly. And once you have suffered enough, you will be shown the light of truth and know those who are worthy and those who are not."

So Jesus set sail and began his torment.

He is still out there, somewhere between life and death, paying the price for our own vanity, greed and wrath. One day, when his task is complete, he shall return, and only then will he bring our forgiveness.

- The Shattered Testament by The Reverend McConnell



“WOULD YOU LIKE TO TALK about what happened last night?” asked Tetrazzini as he and the Mariner settled down for another therapeutic chat.

After returning from McConnell’s church, the Mariner had slept through the morning and well into the afternoon, awaking feeling sick and desperate for alcohol. Tetrazzini had brought him a large glass of wine and another of his sour pills. The Mariner had enjoyed both.

Now they sat together, just as they had done the day before. Tetrazzini tried to start on a positive note, emphasising the progress made the previous day, but the Mariner had a grudge to settle.

“You allowed her to try to burn the Neptune into the sea!”

“I didn’t allow her to do anything,” rebutted the doctor. “This isn’t a prison. We don’t lock anyone up, everyone attends of their own volition.”

The Mariner felt anger growing inside. “Did she burn down the bar? The night you found me?”

“Yes. I told you that a patient of mine started the fire. I have not lied.”

“I didn’t realise you sanctioned it!”

“Stop saying that! I did no such thing.” Tetrazzini himself had grown vexed and flustered by the exchange. “But I’ll have you know that Donna is on the path to recovery. A few more fires and she’ll have lost the compulsion completely. She won’t need to do it. She’ll be the master, not the other way around. Is that worth the burning of a couple of

buildings? I think so. They're just bricks and beams after all."

"And my ship?"

"An unfortunate hiccup."

The Mariner twisted in his seat, though the action hurt his joints terribly.

"Still," Tetrazzini tried to repair the fractured relationship, "once again I owe you my thanks. You put it out and brought Donna back unharmed. That... was quite something. Plus, she still got the thrill from setting the fire and was able to take her medication, so opportunity wasn't lost." The Mariner gave a sour grimace at the silver-lining. "Let's put it behind us, we made excellent progress yesterday, we shouldn't waste that."

"I spoke to McConnell."

"Who?"

"The man who runs the church."

"Oh him," Tetrazzini looked unimpressed. "Sadly some people do cling to superstition, that's true. None more so than that opium addict."

"Opium?"

"Yes. Years back, when I first arrived, he was quite messed up, had been ever since the early days. A traumatic journey here, it is rumoured. I offered to cure him of his addiction, but he turned his back on me. Foolish man. Said he preferred abstinence. Idiot."

“Did he cure himself?”

“How should I know? We haven’t spoken since.”

Tetrazzini picked up a pile of notes and started flicking through, eager to get the session onto more positive ground. “Would it surprise you to learn I’ve spent all morning thinking about your case?”

The Mariner shrugged.

“Seeing as how you’re in something of a... confrontational mood, we’ll be direct. I want to discuss what happened to you and Rebecca.”

The Mariner stiffened in his chair. They’d been over that. What now? “I told you what happened, just as I’m sure Rebecca told you-”

“Rebecca hasn’t said much of anything since, I don’t think she will speak again for months. If *ever*. She’s sunk into a traumatised silence.”

“That’s sad, but I don’t see-”

“You haven’t told me everything.”

“I have!”

“No,” Tetrazzini said with menacing patience. “You have not.”

The Mariner sat in silence, wishing the conversation to end, feeling vulnerable under Tetrazzini’s scrutiny.

The doctor spoke again. “You said you woke up whilst the rape was taking place-”

Shut up!

“And intervened as soon as you came to your senses.”

Please don't say it!

“But that's not true is it? You woke up sooner.”

He knew. Tetrazzini knew the Mariner's secret! Did that mean Rebecca had known? Had they all known he'd sat in the dark and watched?

The Mariner could only whisper his response. “I'm sorry.”

“I understand.” To his surprise, the warmth in Tetrazzini was back. Now that he had broken the lie, he moved swiftly to reassure him. “This stays between us, no-one will know. I'm your doctor, it is my duty to help you as best I can.”

The Mariner nodded, ashamed and wary.

“Your alcoholism isn't the only addiction you have, is it?”

The Marine shook his head. No.

“Tell me about it.”

When the Mariner finally spoke his words tumbled from his mouth like maggots from an infected wound. “I've done terrible things. To women. I've hurt them.”

“Sexually?”

“Yes. I only remember doing it once, and even then it's hazy, but I'm sure I must have done so before. And when I saw it happening to Rebecca, I couldn't move. I had to witness it. I had to.”

“Because you’re addicted to this destructive behavioural pattern. Do you remember me asking you about your male relationships?”

“You said I was seeking out a father figure.”

“Do you think it curious that any female relationship you have ends in disaster? Could it be this hate you feel for women also stems from this memory of your mother?”

“I don’t hate women.”

“Allowing a rape to take place shows a desire to degrade, a yearning to feel powerful. Perhaps because inside you feel powerless?”

“I didn’t allow it, I stopped it.”

“Only when your guilt got too hard to bear. Or perhaps you acted purely to make yourself feel even more powerful? First you watched the rape, then you stopped it, showing you were the one in control at all times. You, and not your mother.”

The Mariner was dumbfounded. There it was, the answer to why he was so flawed. How could it come down to something so small? “Can I be cured?”

Tetrazzini smiled. “My friend, my life-affirming theory treats all ills. First lets address your long term plans. Once we have dealt with your addictions I think you should stay here in Sighisoara. You have been living alone for far too long, you need human interaction. We evolved from social creatures and without communication the brain degrades.”

The Mariner began to protest, but Tetrazzini carried on regardless. “I know you are a man of the sea and will want to

continue on your way as soon as possible, but let me put this to you: get yourself a crew."

"I have a crew."

"What? Those man-eating animals of yours? Can't you see they only serve to drive away any possible friendship you may form? All because of this lingering feeling you have inside that you're not worthy of a relationship in any form other than bestial."

The Mariner remembered Absinth and the fate he'd sentenced the man to. Had he killed him out of fear of getting too close? Had his actions really been that selfish?

"Once you're better we'll have them put down."

Despite his reservations about the devils, the words shocked him. "No!"

"They need to be taken care of."

"Can't we find that zoo and drop them off there?"

Tetrazzini laughed. "What zoo?"

"Grace said-"

"My daughter is prone to flights of fancy, there's no zoo. But if you like we'll try to find someone to look after them, *if* you're so inclined."

The Mariner doubted anyone would be able to tend to the devils without losing their fingers, but kept silent. In fact, getting rid of the devils sounded like a fantastic idea. What use were they anyway? They hated him and he hated them. Perhaps their death would bring some relief.

“With them and your addictions gone, you’ll finally be able to maintain normal healthy relationships. And if, once you’ve achieved those goals, you choose to leave, well that’s fine, but until then you should stay here and embrace this course of action. Do we have a deal?”

Relief made the Mariner’s voice wobble. He’d admitted his sin and instead of being turned out, he was embraced. Nurtured. “We do.”

“Excellent. Now let’s address the tricky process of curing you.” Tetrazzini pulled his chair closer to the Mariner, lowering his voice once in close proximity. “Do you understand the principles of our treatment for your alcoholism?”

“Yes,” he replied and continued at the doctor’s prompting. “Every time I drink, the pill tells my brain not to enjoy it.”

“Something like that,” agreed Tetrazzini. “More like it stops the brain making an association between the act and the feeling of reward; that way we erode the strength of the addiction until it no longer exists.”

The Mariner understood well and approved. It was a gloriously simple process.

Tetrazzini glanced at his hands which he rubbed together, either through enthusiasm or nerves. “Do you think it would work if you didn’t drink alcohol?”

“How so?”

“Let’s say you conjured into your mind the image, the thought, the memory of drinking alcohol whilst you took the pill. Would that work as well?”

“You’re the doctor, you tell me.”

“It’d be nice wouldn’t it? To cure addiction by imagination? But sadly there are limits to my beta-blockers. When you conjure something in your mind you are accessing neural pathways that are already there, not being written. Beta-blockers modify neural connections as they’re made, not after. If the pill is to work, you have to be indulging the addiction, not just evoking it.”

Tetrazzini shifted closer to the Mariner, so much so he could smell coffee on the man’s breath.

“You are special, my friend. I believe you hold the key to what has been happening to all of us, and with your help we will unlock those secrets. But to do that you must first be rid of these addictions. You must. It is for the greater good.”

The Mariner agreed hesitantly, not quite understanding what Tetrazzini was hinting at.

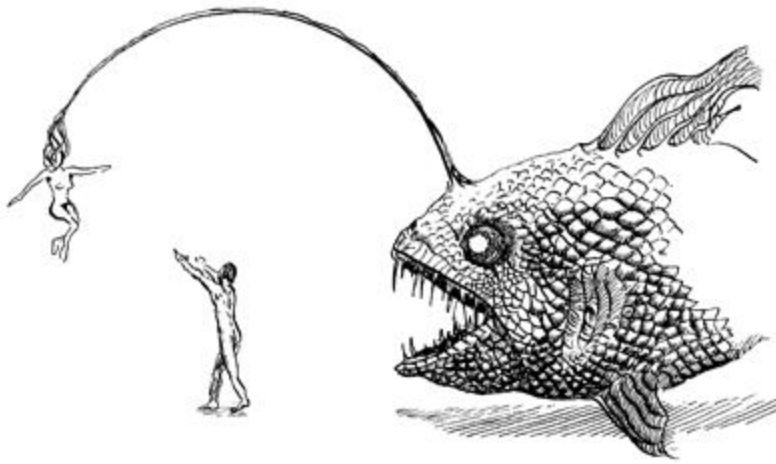
“So you see, it’s important you follow the course of treatment for both your addictions. Take the pill, indulge, and eventually you’ll be the master.”

His eyes widened as he understood what the doctor was suggesting. “You want me to...?”

“I’m not telling you to do anything,” Tetrazzini quickly replied. “But if you want to be free of this compulsion, if you want to be assured you never have to do it again, if you want to forget these terrible things you’ve done, then this is the only way.”

The Mariner’s mind was reeling. Was it true? Was this the road to salvation?

Sensing hesitation, Tetrazzini repeated the mantra. “It’s the only way.”



20 BITTER/SWEET MEDICINE

BETH MASTERSON LEFT TETRAZZINI'S CLINIC for the last time, stepping lightly down the many stairs that wound their way into Sighisoara. Her satchel contained a small collection of paperback novels, a diary, two changes of clothes and some basic food, nothing more than biscuits and a flask of juiced tomatoes. Tetrazzini had managed to procure her lodging and employment at the town's orchard, good work in a world of uncertainty.

Above her, heavy clouds cast intermittent shadows across the steps. It were the first hint of poor weather they'd had in weeks, though after so much sunshine, it was welcome. Clouds meant rain, and rain meant crops; fruit would need picking, plants nurturing. Yes, there would be plenty of work for her to do. God Bless Tetrazzini; he'd given her a new life, something to embrace.

Despite the downward trajectory of her journey, Beth felt lighter with every step.

And somewhere behind, the Mariner followed.

He tried to keep to the shadows whilst appearing casual, nervous that if seen he mustn't appear like a predator. The response of the townsfolk was a concern, there had been a lot of deaths attributed to him since his arrival. There would undoubtedly be dark feelings abound; he should stay concealed lest he provoke a bitter confrontation.

With every sly step, the pills in his pocket rattled within their capsule, the gentle taps a reminder of his intent. He was nauseous with dread, though even this emotion was a mask. Beneath, his heart raced at the prospect. He no longer had to fight his demons. Now they could be set free.

He checked his gun - the Mauser. It felt good in his hand. He didn't plan on using it beyond threats and coercion, but it was a welcome security nonetheless. As yet he hadn't seen another gun within Sighisoara and this power should allow him... indulgence.

Daydreams of how it would play out began flitting through his mind. It shocked him at first, just how easily thoughts of sexual violence filled his consciousness the second he allowed them in. The taboo made his pulse quicken and penis harden. Would he reveal his identity, or blindfold her eyes? Force compliance through threat, or restraint? He liked the idea of her arms bound and body vulnerable to his touch, but there was also a certain thrill from her acting of her own volition, reluctantly servicing his needs under threat of pain.

"Oh it's you. Heading into town as well?"

Her voice shook the Mariner from his sordid reverie. Beth was standing a little way off, looking at him. A hand was raised to shield her eyes from the glare of the clouds above, still bright despite the setting sun.

"I'm just on my way to check on the ship," the Mariner lied. "There were vandals yesterday. I must keep a closer watch."

Beth nodded. "A big old ship like that must attract a lot of attention."

He agreed, and Beth looked around, seemingly relaxed in his presence. He found himself wondering how her cunt tasted. "Would you like to walk with me?"

Utterly perplexed as how to proceed, the Mariner accepted her invitation and took to her side. They strolled, leaving the sloping stairs behind and entering the uppermost of Sighisoara residences.

"So you're cured then?" he said, trying to make conversation. "Congratulations."

"Yes, it's truly amazing. I think back to just a couple of months ago and life was so different. I was an addict in complete denial."

"How so?"

"I thought the cutting was something I had to do, rather than something I chose to do."

The pair passed through a stone archway, wooden doors long since pilfered. Perhaps they'd been burned for warmth or converted into a table, but whoever the thief, all that remained was a tunnel of stone leading to a further slope and larger section of buildings below.

All was quiet, the only sounds that of their feet upon the cobbles and the seagulls soaring above.

“Why cut? I understand why I’m addicted to alcohol. It helps me forget. But cutting?”

“What are you drinking to forget?”

“Me. This. Everything.” He shrugged as if what he was saying was plainly obvious. “But cutting wouldn’t achieve anything like that. So how can you become addicted to something that has such little effect?”

“You’d be surprised,” Beth replied with a sigh. “Cutting does make you forget. While you’re in pain you don’t remember hurtful thoughts and painful memories. They’re still there, but the pain focuses them into that one spot. It’s as if the act of self-harm drags the pain from your head and into the wound. You distract yourself with booze. My method was no different.”

It seemed to make a grim sort of sense to the Mariner. A *familiar* sense. He remembered his experience with the eels, how he’d come to mutilate himself to dull the lust that threatened to drive him insane. Oh yes, Beth’s approach made sense all right.

“It’s logical in a completely insane way.” Beth sighed again, shaking her head at the nonsense of her own life. Mind still locked in lust, he wondered if she’d make a similar sound when penetrated.

“And the pills helped?”

“Oh yes.” Beth brightened up at the mention of treatment. “They’re amazing. Little by little the compulsion lessened until I realised I didn’t want to cut at all.”

“But what if your hurtful thoughts come back? What then?”

“Maybe if they get bad enough I’ll cut. But I’ll take a pill while I do it to make sure the habit doesn’t return. Cutting’s now a tool at my disposal, whereas I used to be the tool for it. You get my meaning?”

The Mariner did. Tetrazzini had expressed the same sentiment repeatedly.

“Here we are,” said Beth, stopping in the street. “Your ship’s that way, my new home the other.”

He glanced along both streets, concerned that she might evade him if he didn’t follow to her new lodgings. Fortunately the streets were empty and darkening.

“I’ll accompany you a bit longer, there are plenty of undesirables in this town.”

“Ain’t that the truth? I heard about what happened to Rebecca. How awful. I’m so glad you were with her. She should have known better than to go to a place like that.”

“I should have done more,” he said sadly, though in his heart he wasn’t sure if he meant to help, or... the alternative.

Beth seemed to assume he meant the more savoury option, and tried to reassure him, caressing his arm. “You did all you could.” He shuddered lightly at her touch, enjoying the warmth of her fingers.

She wants it, his mind whispered. It can hardly be a crime if she wants it.

But did she? He stared at her face, those warm brown eyes, and wondered just where reality ended and his lust began?

Her hand was still on his arm, holding him slightly as they walked. Was this her way of being forward? Thoughts of placing his arm around her were weighed up in his mind. If he did, perhaps she would pull even closer? Perhaps then he could slide his hand down and caress the curves of her behind?

But then she let go and resumed their previous distance. The Mariner's heart was thudding, his nerves plaguing every thought.

"Do you plan on staying in Sighisoara?" she asked him, unaware of the battle of urges raging inside her escort.

"For a while. The doctor has a whole plan laid out for my recovery, and it might take some time."

"Well stick with it," she assured him. "Do everything he tells you to, the man's a genius."

"Yes, I think I will," the Mariner replied, his lust surging. "And I agree. He certainly is."

"And this is home," she said as they arrived at a large farm-like building. "Behind it is the orchard where I'll work, from now until *whenever*."

"What do you get in return?"

"A meal and a bed. As far as I'm concerned that's a bloody good deal."

"You plan on staying here indefinitely?"

"Where else would I go? This is the closest thing to the old world I've found. Do you know of anywhere like it?"

The Mariner had to admit he didn't. Never before had he found a community as built up as this.

"Tell you what," she continued. "If you find Manchester out there, come back and get me."

He nodded, although he'd never heard of the place.

"It was a pleasure to see you again, Mr..?"

Embarrassed by the situation, the Mariner could only shake his head. "I don't know. Sorry."

"Oh well. Keep your secrets then. If you decide to share, perhaps you'd like to drop by sometime?"

"I'd like that."

With goodbyes said, Beth fished a large key out of her pocket and stubbornly worked its way into the wooden door. With a shy and self-conscious glance back, she entered, closing it behind her, the sound of the lock turning a false chime to her safety.

Inside he could hear voices, no doubt her new landlord and employer listing the household rules. The Mariner listened for a moment and reluctantly decided to go for a stroll. It would do no good to strike so soon, he would have to wait for the house to settle.

He made his way down the street, marking the journey in his mind, keen not to lose his bearings. About him the town seemed silent, yet there were still signs of life. Candles were lit within homes creating thin strips of warmth between shutters. Wedged between the houses of Sighisoara, the Mariner felt as if he were once more within the make-do world of the Neptune, rather than in the comfort of

Tetrazzini's rehab centre, an abode otherworldly in its excess.

Despite no longer being able to see Beth, the Mariner trembled with excitement. It had been a long time since he'd laid with a woman. He tried to remember any previous acts of intimacy, to recall the sensation, but an era of frustration separated him. He supposed at one time he could have been attracted to a woman out of respect, perhaps his cock might have stirred from admiration, but now the idea seemed too pale, too childish, too bland for his tastes.

No. No admiration was necessary. He did not need to respect the woman he fucked, unless it was a respect he could tear down and defile. He would trample her pride, jizz on her dignity, make her understand that he was the master and she a place to shove his cock. She would bleed, she would scream. At first it would be from pain, but eventually, he was sure, it would be because she enjoyed it...

Unable to control his lust much longer, the Mariner ducked into an alley and began rubbing his crotch through his thick trousers. His penis strained against the fabric, quickly becoming sore from the exertion. Transient fantasies ran before his mind, luring his want further. They emerged and dissipated seemingly as quick as each stroke of his hand. In one, Beth was pressed up against a wardrobe, her face against the wood, whilst he sodomised her from behind, clutching her hair in one hand, the other clasped about her waist. In another, her hands were tied behind her back whilst he thrust into her mouth, making her eyes water as he sank further and further into her throat. And in another he was wrapping his hand about her neck, choking as he fucked.

With a frustrated grunt, the Mariner ceased his masturbation. He wasn't going to let himself come in his pants. Not with a doctor's instruction to indulge.

He swayed on his feet, hips gently thrusting into the air, still intoxicated by the fantasies fresh in his mind. He had to have her. He had to break her.

The Mariner stumbled out the alley and, as quickly as his erection would allow, made his way back to Beth's new home.

All was silent in the large farmhouse. The Mariner was aware of the risk, this building was probably home to at least twenty people, both masters and workers. If he slipped and allowed Beth to scream, all would be lost. They would disturb and ruin everything.

Stealth was the key. And the pill. The pill gave this legitimacy. The pill made it all okay. The pill proved it a therapy.

The Mariner crept around the building, looking for the servants' quarters. The rooms didn't have windows, but the wooden shutters could easily be pried open. As he approached each one, the Mariner would press his face up to the small gap and gaze inside.

Most were dark, the occupants either out drinking or asleep in the gloom. Finally the Mariner spotted one interior illuminated by candlelight. Taking care not to step on any dry leaves blown over from the orchard, the Mariner took his voyeuristic spot, and peered inside.

Beth was naked. Before her was a large metal tub, with several inches of steaming water pooled within. She was clearly being treated with an evening bath, something to

put her at ease in a strange new home. Her clothes were piled neatly on a Spartan bed. Other than that, the room was empty except an old faded poster upon the wall. It depicted two figures locked in an embrace and a nonsensical statement written above. In smaller letters various names were bunched together in a section at the bottom. As normal, the Mariner could make little sense of it.

His attention wasn't held by the poster for long, the sight of the naked woman before him was intoxicating. His left hand resumed an absent-minded stroking of his crotch, more gentle than before, but still a form of foreplay before he indulged. The other hand toyed nervously with the medication in his pocket.

Beth slid into the water, sighing slightly and closing her eyes as she did. He watched as she cupped water in her hands and dropped it over her shoulders and breasts, tiny rivulets running about her soft skin. As he'd seen upon the day of his arrival, each of her arms was littered with scars. Before, however, he'd only had a glance, but now he could scrutinise. It was fascinating, so much care and attention given to making a patchwork monstrosity upon her skin. The visual representation of a miserable life.

You have to take her, now!

He knew he had to move soon if he wanted to have her. The fantasies he'd entertained for so long were clamouring for attention, jostling like sperm to bear fruition into reality. His head throbbed as if blood wasn't just flowing to his penis, but also filling his temple, making it ready to burst.

You have to fuck her!

Yes, he did. He would soon find release.

Hold her under the water-

It wouldn't take long to pry the wood off, just one quick tug.

-and fuck her cunt-

Then leap inside and silence her.

-and fuck her mouth-

Once she was restrained he'd be able to do what he wanted.

-fuck her hurt her rape her-

The Mariner held out a trembling hand to take hold of the wooden shutter, eye still on the oblivious bathing woman. Ready to strike.

And stopped.

Just what was he doing? How could this possibly be right? This was wrong, terribly wrong. True, he was only acting so that he could be cured in the long term, but wasn't that nonsense? How could raping someone so that he never raped in the future, possibly make sense?

But he wanted to. Oh god, he wanted to. Perhaps he should just embrace the madness? After all, he was no doctor, he was just a mariner, nothing more. Why not give himself over to the more intelligent guidance of another?

But that wasn't right. He felt it in his gut, even though his cock screamed the contrary. He shouldn't be doing this. It was wrong.

Yet despite his conscience, the Mariner still felt his hands moving towards the shutters, still his cock strained and grew

harder. The acceptance of the act's moral depravity only made it all the more alluring. He was going to act-

Don't!

-and he was going to rape this woman. His lust was too great, his mind too trapped in the whirlpool of sordid fantasy. He had to taste her, touch her, violate her; nothing else mattered.

NO!

In a swift movement, acting on an impulse far beneath the fantasies of rape and torture, the Mariner pulled his knife from his pocket and yanked his left shirt sleeve up to the elbow. With barely a moment to think, he slashed, carving a deep red groove where before there was only dirty skin and ancient scars.

Pain erupted in his mind, dominating the foreground. The fantasies, the images of fucking and hurting, were suddenly pushed back; where once they were bright and dazzling, they were now grey monochrome. Distraction brought with it blissful, yet momentary, respite.

But colour began to leak back, so the Mariner slashed again.

Biting down on his tongue to maintain silence, the Mariner carved into his arm, Each strike brought pain, but with that came release, a release from his thoughts and his urges, a release from everything but the blinding white agony.

As the pain reached a cacophony, his lust finally dissipated. His penis, sore and tired, became flaccid once more.

The Mariner slumped onto the leafy ground, blood thick around his arm. It ran onto his chest soaking his shirt, the

scarlet fluid he'd expelled in place of another. Pain to bring control.

And with the control came the guilt.

Patient Number 0020644

Name: John Doe

I awoke this morning with the image of a wasp. I don't know how it lodged so firmly in my mind, to my knowledge there are no wasps in Sighisoara, though it is entirely possible a nest could be aboard any one of the many ships that dock here. Still, something tells me that this wasp didn't fly into my mind through sight, but through recall. A memory, something on the tip of my brain's tongue, only just out of reach.

It is hardly surprising that I should be thinking so much about memories, given the peculiar nature of our 'John Doe'. His addictions have turned out to be deeply entwined with his personality, and problematic to treat. Though tragic, it is imperative that the conflict inside be resolved. Only then will we begin answering the larger questions.

This evening I attended a sermon by the Reverend McConnell. I am not a religious man (though like many I have been sorely tempted by the madness that has grasped our world), but I wanted to speak to the reverend about his interactions with my latest patient.

When I arrived, however, he was preaching to the ignorant masses about 'The Shattering'. His notion is that our predicament is a punishment from God, a time in the wilderness before the return of Jesus Christ (who will sew

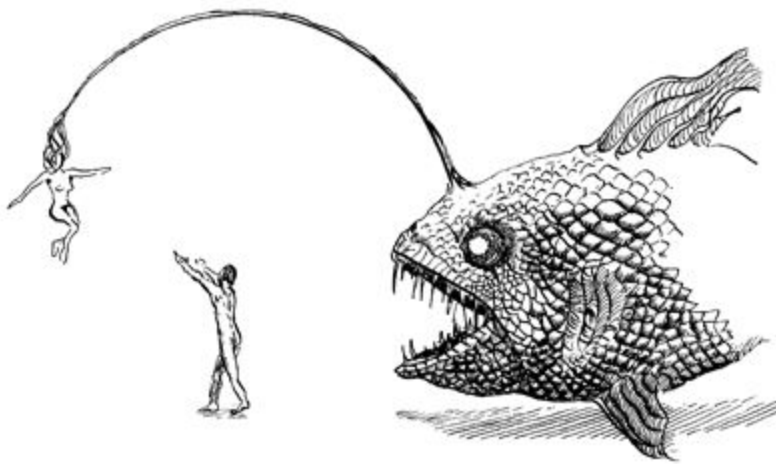
reality together – what utter tosh); rather fanciful, but the name is apt. Shattering.

Our world has splintered and fallen apart; if only we could grasp what it once resembled, might we piece it together?

But that image is lost to us now. We've forgotten. Too far down the path, and we've lost the route back.

And yet I awoke this morning with a buzzing in my head. Something about a wasp. Something I've forgotten. I reached out to grasp it, and for a moment felt its wings brush against my fingertips, but then it escaped, flying out of my mind and away into the forgetful mist.

T.



21

NOT A WAGON IN SIGHT

THE GRASS FELT COOL AGAINST the Mariner's face. He breathed deeply, inhaling the fresh scent. Dirt went up his nose, but he didn't mind. The pain in his left arm was a more pressing

concern. He didn't begrudge it though, it was a pain he deserved.

Bloody and distraught, he'd staggered away from Beth's quarters and made his way up to Tetrazzini's rehab centre. There, shy of the building by around ten foot, he'd collapsed, exhausted.

He'd failed.

Completely.

He clenched his fists in frustration, grass and soil scrunched between digits, and he let out a muffled groan into the ground, but the trembling earth gave no reply, instead it came from above.

"Did you do it?" Grace's voice surprised him, making him look up with a jolt, green strands sticking to his cheek.

"Do what?"

"What he suggested you do." Grace stood in the dim, partly illuminated by lamplight coming out of the many rehab windows.

The Mariner pulled himself into sitting position. "You listened?" He was too weary to be angry. Too ashamed for any further revelation to sink him further. There was nothing lower than him. "You spied on my therapy session?"

"I often listen. He doesn't think I can hear from the outside, but I can. That's how I knew about Donna and your boat. Thank you for trying to talk to him about the zoo. It's no good though. No-one ever remembers."

The Mariner swayed where he sat, trying to ingest the information. "You heard our session?" he asked again, dumbly.

"Yeah. I'm sorry. Did you do it?"

The Mariner looked to the ground and shook his head, chin scraping his chest.

"You won't get better if you don't."

"I know." He looked at the girl, amazed how calmly she talked with a man she knew to be a dangerous predator. "Aren't you afraid of me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you didn't do it."

"But I wanted to. I *really* wanted to."

She shrugged as if this was entirely inconsequential. "You still didn't."

The Mariner looked up at the sky. The clouds had parted in a small patch, allowing a collection of stars to peek through. They glittered against the black and the Mariner felt small. Small and powerless.

"A memory haunts me, and I've spoken to both a doctor and a priest about it. The doctor says I should cast the memory aside, because it only exists in my head. The priest says I should use it to find forgiveness. What do you think?"

She took a moment to think. "That zoo existed."

“But it doesn’t any-more.”

In the dark it was easy to imagine Grace as being four times the age she was, such was the world-weary sadness upon her face. When she spoke, her voice carried experience beyond her years. “We are made up of everything that’s happened to us. We can’t toss it aside and pretend otherwise. Nor can we force ourselves to feel something we don’t.”

The Mariner stared at the girl, his breath short, realisation and suspicion running through his mind like heroin in the mainline. “You’re an addict aren’t you? You don’t run this place with your father, he built it to treat you! That’s why he’s obsessed with curing every addiction he finds. What was it?”

“He helps a lot of people. They come and go, sometimes staying just a few days. Other times they’re here so long they become a part of you. You get used to their voice, their scent. But then one day they’re cured and off they go. He never helps me though. He never lets me go.”

“Where would you go?”

She shrugged. “I used to like visiting the zoo. The animals just wander around and you can stroke them if you want. I used to take some fruit and feed them from my hands like this.” Grace held out her palm, flat and upturned. “But now no-one remembers and he says I have to stay here and help.”

The Mariner struggled to understand, so asked his question once more. “What were you addicted to?”

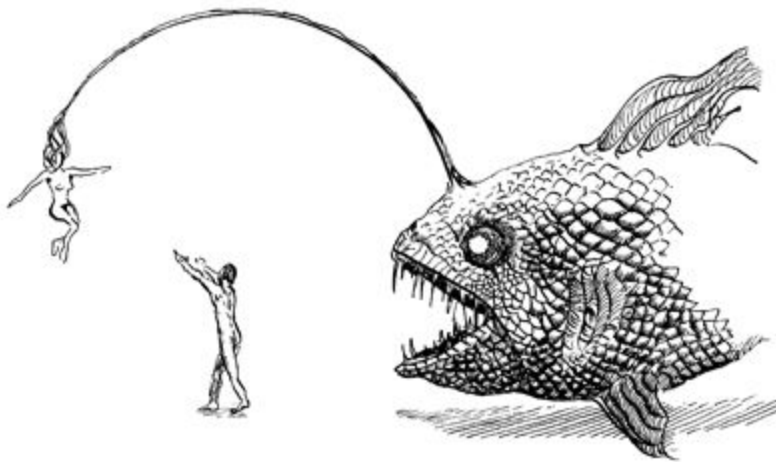
Grace’s sad expression suddenly turned to one of loathing, a sudden rage that almost sent the Mariner falling onto his

back. "I've never been an addict," she hissed, tears welling in her eyes. "And he's not my father."

And when Jesus Christ returns there will be forgiveness for those who repent. He will sew the world together and all shall be restored.

But for those who do not believe in forgiveness, for those who feel themselves beyond his touch, there will be darkness. Darkness and an endless sea.

- The Shattered Testament by The Reverend McConnell



22
DISCHARGED

TETRAZZINI'S OFFICE DOOR CREAKED OPEN, so softly that the doctor thought it must be a breeze for he was certain that if a person had come down the hall he'd have heard their approach. A dirty set of fingers curled around the frame.

"Is that you, my friend?" he asked, rising from his chair.

The Mariner, looking worse for wear, left arm soaked with his own blood, entered and closed the door behind. The pair stood in silence. And anticipation.

“Well?” Tetrazzini asked. “Did you do it?”

“No, I could not.”

The doctor let out a long breath, glimmers of disappointment carefully hidden behind his objective façade.

“I admire your fortitude of character, but if you want to be cured-”

“I do not.”

Tetrazzini’s mouth dropped in surprise. “You don’t?” Suddenly the gentle man transformed, voice rising within the silent room. “Then perhaps I’m wasting my time giving you bed and board? Perhaps you should go rest your head beside those beasts of yours?”

The Mariner didn’t bite the bait. Instead he barely moved, keeping his eyes fixed upon the doctor with cold intensity.

“Why do you keep track of passing days in a world where dates mean nothing?”

Tetrazzini scrunched up his face in frustration. “What are you talking about?”

“Why?”

“Because time’s important! It’s falling apart everywhere else, so why not try?”

Still the Mariner did not move. "I've been thinking a lot about time. And about memories. You told me that the past doesn't exist anywhere outside my own head. All that exists is the now."

"Yes, that would be the logical way of viewing it."

"But I don't think that's true. I think time is like Reverend McConnell's story box. Our lives are the viewing piece, moving across time and only showing us one moment after another. But as we pass, those moments continue, locked in place. We can't return to them, but they're there, trapped in that singular point going over and over again. That's what the Neptune showed me; the past exists beyond memories, it's just they're the only way we can reach out to them."

Incredulity had twisted Tetrazzini's face into a goblin mask. "So?"

"I don't deserve to forget. If I put the terrible things I've done behind me, I'm betraying those women whom I've hurt. *Whom I'm still hurting.* And if I abandon or change the memory of what my mother did, then I'm leaving that boy alone, trapped forever in the dark. For he is still there. He always will be."

"You're sentencing yourself to a life of misery out of a sense of duty to things *only you remember*. That woman you killed doesn't remember a thing. She's dead."

"Not in the past she's not. She's there, and she's in pain."

Tetrazzini threw his hands into the air as if he was dealing with a complete idiot. "So you don't want to get better, is that it? You don't want to be cured?"

"Like you were?"

Tetrazzini's eyes widened in shock. He gaped like a fish, some type of snapper, for his face glowed red.

"I spoke to Grace. I thought she was your patient, but she's not. She's your treatment."

Silence followed, the doctor flustered. Finally he pointed at the Mariner as if he were the one accused, his finger trembling with his voice. "You don't understand, you don't understand what it's like!"

"Yes I do. I'm a monster too."

"No! *Addiction* makes a monster, and I'm not an addict. A junkie with no fix robs houses, a junkie with a whole stash keeps to himself. I used to be one, oh yes, I used to be unable to control myself. Whenever I saw-" Words stuck in his throat, unable to vocalise his love for young flesh. "I wouldn't be able to help myself, my mind would go there, that dark place you and I know so well. It was fine in the old-world with laws and rules; there you would be called 'kiddie-fiddler' or 'pervert', but without evidence you were fine to live your life, to do what you do. Not this place. Here there are no rules, and mistakes lead to lynchings."

He staggered to the Mariner, face distorted by his plea, hands out and clasping. "But my drug cured me! I found Grace, kept her with me and used her to suck my addiction dry." His eyes desperately searched the Mariner's face for some sign of acceptance. "Think of the amount of children I've saved from my old-self by doing this."

"All except Grace."

"A small price to pay!" he snapped. "Sure, I fuck her now and then, a quick dose of beta-blockers just to keep everything in check and make sure the addiction never

reasserts, but in return I cure people. I take monsters and turn them into lives. Real *human* lives!”

The Mariner’s face was like a rock and his words an avalanche. “Addiction doesn’t make us a monster. It’s a very human trait. It’s what we do, that makes the monster.”

Tetrazzini didn’t respond, glowering in the gloom.

“I’m leaving. I don’t want a cure, to my victims that would be a further betrayal. If I suffer, if I carry this with me every day until the end, then just maybe my sin will be in part repaid.”

“You think you can control it, but you’ll give in. Sooner or later you *will*. Except when you do, you’ll be without *me*. You’ll be too weak to resist, and so you’ll go on hurting women over and over again. See if you don’t!”

“No. If I suffer enough, perhaps they won’t have to.”

“Fine, fuck off! Do you think we need you? You think I give a shit? I’ll be right here, doing what I’ve always done.”

The Mariner nodded and finally showed an expression on his face. A distant and hollow smile. And just as that smile had chilled the last few beats of Absinth’s heart, it chilled Tetrazzini’s too, despite the temperature in the room rising with every second.

“That’s right. I’m leaving and you’re staying.” He pointed his trusty Mauser at Tetrazzini’s left knee. “I dropped in on Donna before I came to you, and gave her all the flammable spirits in your storage. As I figure it, she’s probably got one burning left before she’s cured. I think a lot will be cured after that.”

Patient Number 0020375

Name: Frank Tetrazzini

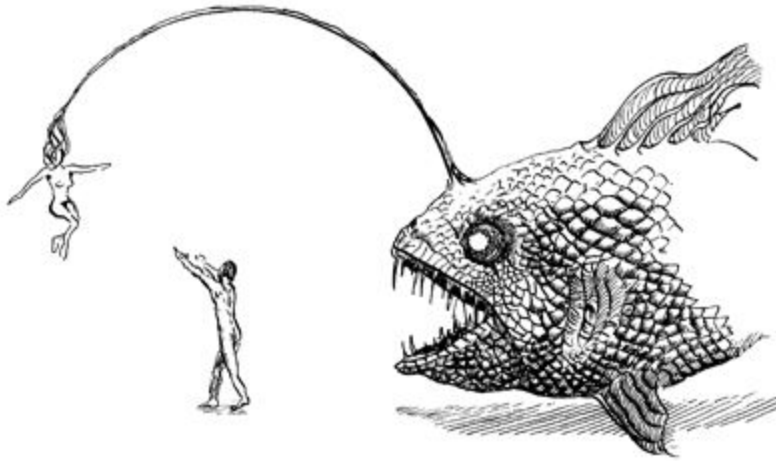
The beta-blocker/Ibogaine compound is having a splendid effect. I can already feel the urges diminishing. It is certainly a strange sensation, losing an addiction whilst still enjoying the act you were so recently dependent upon. It is most empowering.

I think I shall set up a permanent rehab centre here on Sighisoara. We seem to have been accepted by the locals who believe that Grace is my daughter. After stern instruction, she's agreed to play along, realising that it is mutually beneficial. However, this is a role-play I try to dissuade her from practising in private. Yesterday she called me 'Daddy' whilst we were alone. This displeases me. Somehow the idea of her being someone else's is far more tantalising.

I am concerned about her growing older. Once breasts begin to form she'll lose a certain appeal. That day can't be far off, and I mourn the passing of each one before that, but by then I shall be free from addiction and able to choose a replacement carefully. After all, addiction leads to rash decisions. With due care, I shall be safe.

Having practised my theories on several test cases and now myself, I am looking forward to taking on patients. This island seems to be a hub of sorts and I can imagine a permanent settlement here. Yes, Sighisoara's the end for us. I don't wish to ever leave.

T.



23

THE DEVIL, GRACE & GOD

THE MARINER DESCENDED INTO TOWN like an angel of death. Against his back the rehab centre burned brightly, the flames reaching high into the air, literally a funeral pyre. The sky behind was a deep blue from the rising sun. Sighisoara had awakened to another inferno, though this time the perpetrator walked boldly amongst them. As he passed the residents shrank away; news of the monster had spread wide.

Reverend McConnell saw the Mariner as he made his way towards the Neptune and called out. With no response offered, he gave chase, catching up as he neared the dock.

“What have you done? What have you done?” He gestured towards the fire.

“I am paying for my sins.” The Mariner did not slow, but kept his eyes firmly ahead.

McConnell glanced from the Mariner’s back, to the billowing smoke atop of the hill and then back to the man who’d

caused it. Fearfully he scurried after.

“There’s no need for this misery! You must forgive yourself!”

“There can be no forgiveness.” The Mariner’s voice was harsh from the smoke. “If someone says they forgive they are either lying or no longer care. I’m prepared to do neither.”

“God can forgive! Jesus can forgive! When he returns, he’ll take your pain away, just ask him for forgiveness!”

“What right does God have to offer such forgiveness?” asked the Mariner as they walked along the dock, ever closer to the Neptune. “My sins are not his business, neither are they yours.” Suddenly he halted, so unexpectedly McConnell almost walked straight into his back.

They were not alone on the dock, ahead stood Grace, looking out at sea. A light breeze kicked up her hair revealing pale and tragic features. They were set, staring longingly at the horizon.

The Mariner walked over to her and got down on his haunches. “You can’t come with me. I’m damned. I have devils that kill. I have addictions that gnaw. All I touch turns to rot. There’s nothing for you if you come.”

“What about the zoo?”

“It’s gone,” said McConnell from behind the Mariner. “The Shattering has taken it away.”

“I can’t take you there,” the Mariner told the small girl. “It doesn’t exist.”

"But you didn't do what he asked," she said, smiling at the angel of death at her side. "You hurt yourself instead." And with that she leaned forward and kissed the Mariner upon the cheek, her lips passing a soft comfort utterly unlike anything he could have comprehended before. "Don't you remember?"

Everything's gonna be alright

Tears broke from his eyes with a surge of emotion so powerful he bent over as if in pain, hands clasping his head and eyes scrunched up tight. He sobbed. Sobbed for everything cruel and wrong in the world. He sobbed the way he felt he couldn't as a boy, suffocating in the dark. He sobbed because the moment her lips had touched his skin he remembered intimacy without lust, friendship without sin. It was possible to love without destroying.

"I remember," he said as he openly wept. "I remember."

"You remember! You remember!" the girl was shouting at his side and jumping up and down. The Mariner opened his eyes in confusion and saw Grace pointing out to sea. At first he couldn't make it out through the tears, but soon a shape formed on the horizon.

"It's back! You brought it back!" she cried and dashed across the gangway and onto the Neptune.

The Mariner looked on in wonder. An island had appeared, far in the distance, but definitely there. It sparkled in the morning light. Grace's zoo.

"Sweet Jesus." McConnell was paralysed in dumb amazement. He looked from the island to the Mariner, face

grey and mouth slack. "Are you *him*?"

The Mariner strode hastily after Grace, aware the devils might devour her as she stepped aboard. His heart leapt in his chest as he saw one run up to her, bounding in its strange hopping-run. His hand went for the Mauser, but paused as the beast obediently sat.

Grace giggled and leaned down to pat it on the head. "This one's called Basil."

"Is that so?" he muttered, unsure of the reality around him. All the other devils gathered around them like sentinels, watching with silent nobility.

Neptune's crew were ready to sail.

From the dock, McConnell suddenly snapped into sense and dashed towards the ship. "Are you him?" he shouted. "Have you returned to bring us forgiveness?" He ran up the gangway and joined the man, girl and bestial disciples aboard. "Are you Jesus Haych Christ?"

"I don't know," the Mariner replied honestly. "But I'm searching for something better than forgiveness and it can't be found here."

"Where then?" McConnell asked, tears of hope beginning to run down his own cheeks.

The Mariner took Grace's hand and laughed though his sobs. "I guess the first place to look is the zoo."

Grace beamed at him, the smile an experiment upon her features, and laughed too. The three lost souls stood like that under the endless sky, their cheeks wet as if in early

morning dew. In a world drifting apart, they'd suddenly been pushed together.

And so the Neptune's crew set sail and left Sighisoara, a town awaking to death and murder, upper peak burning like a candle; and they sailed into the brilliance of an early morning light, with nothing but their haunted past behind them.

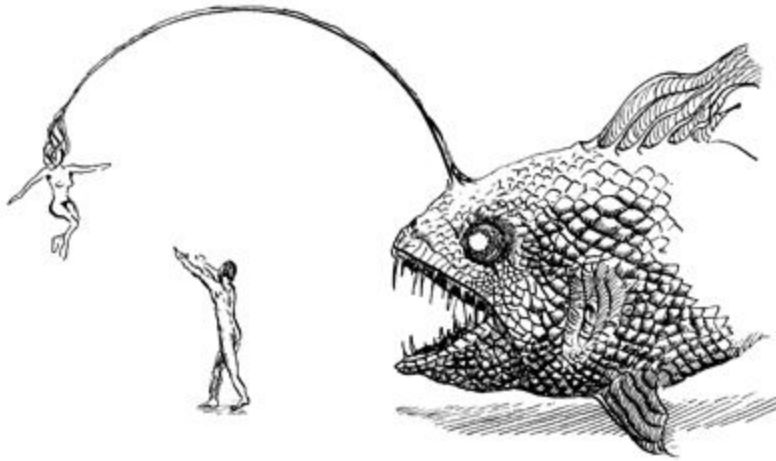
PART III

GRACE O'HARA'S ZOO & THE MONKS OF DÉJÀ VU

“Doctor, doctor, I think I’m suffering from Déjà vu.” “It’s a brain tumour.”

Hilarious Joke





24

THE WASP WHISPERS

WHEN AT SEA, THE MARINER dreamed. There was naught else to do, the ship tended to sail itself, and the endless horizon brought little comfort. Sometimes he dreamed of his mother holding a pillow tight across his face, other times he dreamed the sins of his ship, the Neptune. Tonight he dreamed of a man named Absinth Alcott, a pirate who'd once roamed the ocean and now only existed as tiny fragments lodged deep in a Tasmanian devil's colon.

In life, Absinth had worn grubby t-shirts looted from cargo ships and countless victims. In death he wore beautiful elegant robes that flowed in the wind. Skin, once old, scarred and dry, now glowed with hidden energy encased beneath jewels and ribbons. In death he'd become a picture of health.

This was because Absinth Alcott was dressed as the Oracle, a woman who'd deemed to steal his mind.

And now the Mariner was once again within her tent, arranged just as it had been before, candles and pillows surrounding a central platform from which the Oracle could hold court. There was no Oracle here though, nor any disciples; just Absinth, who watched the Mariner approach with keen interest and a wry smile upon his lips.

He spoke, and although his voice remained the same, all pauses, inflections and mannerisms identical to before, it still seemed as if something else had seized control of his reigns. Whomever the master, they operated his vocal chords like the strings of a puppet, enacting their own play with expert precision.

“Wasps are awful creatures,” he began. “Not like bees. Oh no. Bees are lovely. Bees make honey and pollinate plants. All manner of pastures and plains rely upon bees. Nature’s honourable little suicide-bombers.”

Absinth chuckled to himself and made a faint buzzing sound with his lips as he grinned. Then, like a change in the wind, his face grew stern and cold. “Wasps on the other hand, are total shits.”

The Mariner inched forward and sat before Absinth, becoming to him the pupil he’d once refused the Oracle.

“There is one type of wasp I wish to speak of, one above all the others. This particular wasp lived in the Americas-”

The name sounded familiar, yet strange. He found himself thinking of California, that name written upon the bottles of wine he’d devoured an aeon ago. He asked Absinth where this strange place was, though his query was met with frustration.

“Be quiet Claude! I’m trying to explain something! Every beast wishes to protect its young, and this wasp is no different. However, instead of making a nest or laying eggs, the wasp finds a caterpillar and pierces it with a stinger. The caterpillar survives and believes itself to have narrowly escaped death, yet it has not. Inside its plump body the Wasp’s young grow, its babies; the caterpillar having become impregnated during the attack.”

As Absinth spoke, the Mariner found himself fidgeting uncomfortably, a growing uneasiness building in his gut.

“They feed from their host, always careful not to feast upon vital organs, always wary that to kill the caterpillar would end their living nursery.”

Itch upon itch broke out across the Mariner’s skin, and as each were scratched, several more began in its place. The Mariner became like a child riddled with lice, squirming where he sat.

“Soon the caterpillar, having grown fat, comes to believe that it is thriving. Little does it know that deep within its swollen body there are dozens of squirming larvae, for it is they who have grown fat, not it.”

The itching had become unbearable and the Mariner lost all semblance of a pupil; now he rolled about on the ground, clawing at his skin.

“And then finally the hatching day arrives. The wasp larvae begin to eat their way free. Munch munch munch, through flesh they go. Munch munch much through organs. The caterpillar is so confused it cannot fight; in fact all it wants is the larvae back, back inside so it can feel fat once more. Can you imagine the confusion? The distress? To see your own innards tear themselves free?”

With the final word spoken, the torment stopped. All that was left was the heat of lingering pain upon his flesh. The Mariner stood, still under the gaze of the man who'd once been his friend and foe.

"Why are you telling me this?"

Absinth seemed to think for a moment, though when he spoke it was clear he'd paused simply to play with the Mariner's unease. "I've brought something for you."

"What is it?"

"A box."

And there was a box before him, one he hadn't noticed until now. It was large and made of cardboard. The Mariner had seen many boxes of this type before, usually they were sealed up with tape and could contain anything from dried food to children's toys. This one seemed battered and well used, the top joins torn and mottled by damp.

"A cardboard box?"

"See what's written upon it?"

The Mariner looked again and saw that there was indeed writing across its side. Large letters penned in black ink: THE MARINER.

"It contains everything that is you, everything that makes up your consciousness. All that is in your head and heart lies in that box."

"Can I look?"

"Be my guest."

With trepidation the Mariner crawled forwards. Absinth watched, nodding encouragement with each hesitant shuffle.

The Mariner looked inside.

Empty.

“There’s nothing there.”

Absinth shook his head. “Look again.”

The Mariner did as he was asked. At first nothing, but then it caught his eye: a small tissue bunched up in the corner. He reached inside and picked it up, the thin paper feeling brittle between his fingers. He lifted it to his nose and sniffed the sweet smell of dried semen.

“Is this it?” he asked. “Just a soiled tissue? Is that all?”

Absinth nodded with deep regret. “Yes. The Wasp took everything else.”

Wakefulness brought with it sorrow and shame. These were the emotions that dominated the Mariner’s life and they rushed to meet him like excited puppies, yapping and howling for attention. And like any loving guardian he couldn’t help but nurture their demands.

He opened his eyes to his cabin, faintly illuminated by dim candlelight. He was lucky to wake when he did, the wick was down to its last nub and when finally snuffed out the room would be plunged into darkness. He groaned and rolled towards it, lifting the small block of wax to another, doubling the light and creating a synthetic sunrise.

Beneath him the ship refused to stir, a faint echo of a creak the only sound from her slumbering form. No waves. No wind. All was quiet.

The Mariner stood and undressed, doing his best to ignore the lusts and horrors that jostled for attention within his head. There had been a time when he'd have been easily overwhelmed by them, but not now. No longer a novice, he'd learned how to keep his demons in check.

With ritualistic determination, the Mariner stripped naked and stood in the candlelight, hollow eyes staring into darkness. As a soldier would stand to attention, his posture was rigid. For twenty breaths he remained just so, the only movement his chest as it dragged in air and pushed it out again with an age-old weariness.

Then, once the count was done, he swung a cat 'o' nine tails up over his shoulder. With a snap it struck his back sending searing white pain in response. The shock made his legs buckle, but the moment passed and he gathered himself upright again. Teeth gritted, he took another swipe. And another.

Only once a trickle of blood ran freely from several wounds, congregating in the cleft between his buttocks, did the Mariner stop. Breath ragged and legs weak, his work was done. There were no more awful thoughts. All were dwarfed by the pain.

He dressed, wincing as the fabric stuck, not only to the fresh wounds upon his back, but also to the many small incisions incurred on Sighisoara. Such was the price of control: a bloody back and a tiger-arm.

Holding a candle before him, the Mariner made his way out of the small cabin, along a corridor and up a set of stairs that

led to the top deck. The insides had been charred and singed, but the Neptune had survived the arsonists' attack. He coughed, recoiling at the strong smell of smoke that lingered.

Just as there had been a time when he'd had little self-control, there'd been a time when he'd slept in the open air every night. True, he still felt more comfortable under the moon and stars, but since travelling with Grace and McConnell, things seemed... different. Calmer. As if their presence had lulled the ship into sleep.

"Or the wind," he murmured, shaking his head. As soon as they'd left Sighisoara the wind had died, leaving them stranded somewhere between one island and another, a place Grace called the zoo.

Being dead in the water was excruciating, especially because the three hadn't packed any additional supplies. The Mariner had been in a rush to depart and McConnell hadn't even planned on boarding until he'd stumbled across the gang-way, awe-struck by the return of the zoo to the horizon. Grace alone had anticipated the journey, but her childish mind had only contemplated enough snacks to get her through a day or so. Now they were gone, and everyone was growing hungry.

Of the three, Grace coped with the stillness the easiest. The devils were quite taken with her, and she played with them constantly. Mostly fetch, sometimes tug-of-war. The Mariner didn't like to watch these games, he'd seen the devils behave in a similar way, but rather than pulling at a piece of old rope, they'd been yanking the intestines from a belly. Still, he had to hand it to her, Grace had these things as docile as pups.

McConnell, on the other hand, was a terrible headache. He questioned the Mariner incessantly, about his travels, his memories, his time in Sighisoara, all to which the Mariner gave as little information as he could get away with. He was done with others scrutinising his life. If Sighisoara had taught him anything it was that letting people into his world caused trouble.

Why had he even let them aboard? The Mariner struggled to remember his precise thinking, he'd been too caught up in emotion, and now the logic was hazy.

The sooner they got to the zoo the better, then McConnell could stay with Grace and he could be on his way; back to the endless sea, searching for the 'island' and the answers contained within.

Stepping out into the night air, the Mariner was struck by how dark it was despite being on the top deck. His candle illuminated the area in front and further along he could make out the shapes of Grace and McConnell, hunched over a small flickering lantern. But that was all. Beyond them was pitch black, a thick blanket that conjured a thousand monsters born of paranoia.

"Good job there's no wind," he said as he approached the pair. McConnell turned his head and held a finger to his lips. Grace slept beside him, wrapped in a thick blanket with a tazzy-devil in her lap. Like McConnell, the beast wasn't asleep and gave the Mariner a warning glance of its own, but held back from growling. Neither man nor beast wanted to wake the young girl.

"Why do you say that?" whispered McConnell. "I thought still air spelled disaster? That's what you've been saying."

The Mariner nodded. "I was and that's right, but not tonight. With cloud cover this thick we could sail right into a cliff-side and never see it coming. Best we wait here until it rains. After the rain we'll get some light and some wind, you'll see."

But damn, it was dark. The Mariner stared at the sky, trying to get some glimpse of the moon poking through. Not a hint. It was as if they were within a cave, deep underground, rather than out at sea.

McConnell shrugged, dismissing the concern. "If you say so, you're the sailor."

"And you're not? Spent your whole life on Sighisoara?"

"Oh no, I drove there. It was just after the Shattering, when it was still possible to do such a thing."

"You remember the Shattering?"

McConnell shook his head. "No. Just the drive. A long drive across Europe. I was trying to get as far as I could from home, only after a point I could no longer tell which direction home was, or even if it still existed. To be honest, I don't even know what I was running from. Sighisoara wasn't an island when I arrived, and then - one day - it was."

The reverend smiled grimly. "But that was long ago. The point I was trying to make was that I'm not a sailor, I've never spent time at sea, so I wouldn't know how to read the signs like you do. Though when the sun went down I didn't see a hint of cloud in the sky, and I don't see how you could tell if there was one now."

"Pardon?" *Something's wrong.* Suddenly the Mariner's breath became shallow, the hairs on his neck bristling.

“I mean,” McConnell continued, unaware of the Mariner’s alarm. “Who can tell what’s in the night sky? A dragon could hover right above and we’d never know.”

The Mariner paused and looked into the abyss above. There wasn’t even the slightest hint of light in any direction.

“But there’s usually some light...”

“From where?”

“The sky.”

McConnell grinned and shook his head. “My friend, you’ve either been at the bottle or touched by God, I’m not sure which. The night is the night, there is no light.”

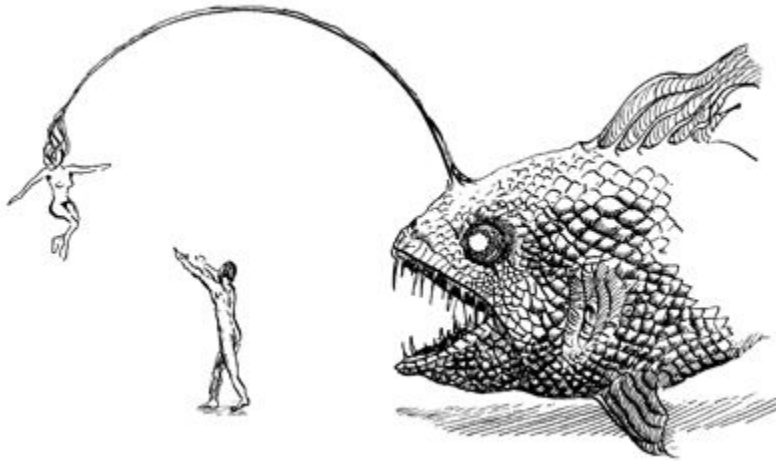
The Mariner wanted to grab McConnell by the shoulders and shake him, force him to remember, but he knew better than that. If McConnell had forgotten about the stars and the moon, then for all their sakes he should avoid the subject. He remembered the change that had occurred in the philosophy teacher. He remembered the change in Absinth.

Absinth. He hissed the name through his teeth, remembering the dream from which he’d awoken.

“Something about the Oracle..”

McConnell didn’t respond and the silence was pleasing. The Mariner sought no conversation, instead he focused his attention on the surrounding blackness. The suffocating dark felt like a huge wall about to bear down. Oppressive and bleak.

McConnell had forgotten the existence of stars and who could blame him? There wasn’t a single star to be seen.



25

FRESH SHORES

JUST AS THE MARINER HAD predicted, the morning brought a breeze that slowly pushed the Neptune into motion. Contrary to his foretelling however, there was no rain. The Mariner watched the sky throughout the early hours until the rising sun changed the pigment from murky black to brilliant blue. His fears had been confirmed, there were no clouds. Had they cleared before dawn? The alternative seemed too daunting to contemplate.

“What are you looking for?” Grace asked as she’d awoke, rubbing her face to cast off the night’s grime.

“Nothing,” the Mariner lied. To mention the stars was a risk he wasn’t prepared to take, not with McConnell, and certainly not with Grace. “With the wind returning we should arrive soon.”

This seemed to bring a great deal of cheer to the girl, though the Mariner couldn’t understand why. The only place in the world he had a desire to be was aboard this ship, and even

then it was out of necessity rather than affection. What must it be like to feel a connection to a place or time? Was the island he sought such a place? Would it be his home?

Like the previous two mornings, the devils busily gathered around Grace for their early feed. The Mariner had watched in disgust as Grace shelled out portions of her travel provisions to each of the beasts with equal measure.

“It won’t be long until the wind picks up, then they can find themselves food at the zoo!” the Mariner chided, but Grace had turned her nose up in protest.

“They are members of the crew, just like us. Aren’t you Basil?”

The devil, tongue and teeth dripping with drool, wasn’t interested in the notion of equality, merely the piece of dried meat in her hands.

“Bllleeeeeuuuuggggghghhhhh!”

“That’s right, you are,” she’d said, patting the beast and allowing it to eat from her palm.

The Mariner had watched both feeds, amazed that every time she allowed their chops near her fingers she never lost a single digit.

This morning was different, there was no more food to go around and the devils were beginning to gather expectantly.

“She has them well trained doesn’t she?”

McConnell appeared beside the Mariner, doing up his trousers from using the latrine. Both men watched the girl and beasts from the safety of the far side of the deck, having

learnt from harsh experience that the devils liked to have priority when it came to breakfast.

“No, they have *her* well trained,” the Mariner said as he checked his Mauser. “You think they’re fluffy little dogs? They’re not. I’ve seen those things strip a person to the bone. She thinks she’s the master because when they’re fed they don’t kill her, but they’re the ones holding the power. They’re the ones that choose not to kill.”

“But she’s got no more food to give!”

The Mariner looked at McConnell gravely and raised his pistol, ready for the first sign of aggression.

“Right listen up you lot!” Grace called the devils to attention, clapping her hands as if addressing a classroom. “We’re going to be arriving at the zoo soon and I want you to be on your best behaviour!”

A dozen small heads cocked to the side as they tried to understand why this monkey was chattering instead of dishing out grub.

“There are lots of other animals there and you’re not to hurt any of them. You can play, but you can’t bite.”

One eager devil, having grown impatient hopped out of the crowd towards Grace’s bare leg.

The Mariner tensed his finger on the trigger.

“Bluuuurg-”

“No!” Grace swatted the devil on the nose. The beast’s eyes widened with dumb shock, its trap slapping shut in

confusion. “That’s a *bad* Vivian! Very naughty! No tummy rubs for you.”

Fully chastised, Vivian the devil grumbled and laid down, nestling his snout between dainty paws.

“There’s no more food, I’m all out.” Grace held her hands out, palms open like a magician performing a magic trick. A dozen faces turned to look at them and then back to the girl’s face, trying to understand the complex concept. “But when we get to the zoo I will find you some breakfast, and then we’ll all eat together. Won’t that be nice?”

For a moment, the Mariner was sure they’d all break rank and savage her, but then the girl clapped hands and, as if dismissed, the beasts meandered away.

“She’s broken them,” the Mariner huffed, holstering his Mauser and refusing to look McConnell in the eye. Basil walked up to the two men to see if the responsibility of dispensing food had simply passed from one monkey to another. “Some guards you are!” he growled, lightly kicking at the beast, though avoiding actual contact. Grace would probably swat him on the nose too if he wasn’t careful.

As the sun climbed into the sky, all three human passengers watched as the island grew closer. Unlike Sighisoara, the zoo had little height, instead its mass was broad and flat, nestled with trees and strange skeletal structures.

“What are those?” he asked, pointing and squinting.

“They’re cages,” Grace explained as an absolute authority on the matter. “They used to hold all the animals in them, but now the animals just roam about. It was cruel to keep them locked up.”

“What sort of animals?”

Grace shrugged. “Big ones, small ones.”

The Mariner scanned the shore for a suitable place to dock, but unlike Sighisoara there didn’t seem to be any formal point. Instead, the entire circumference was littered with small bays and scattered rocks, shallow waters and beds of sand. All far too shallow to bring the Neptune anywhere near.

“We’ll drop anchor here.” The Mariner was stern and resolute. “I’ll take a row-boat out to see if it’s safe and then return to collect the pair of you.”

“How long will you be?” Grace frowned and stuck out her bottom lip. Having no experience with children, the Mariner looked to McConnell for assistance.

The reverend however was more concerned about being left alone with the devils. He glanced nervously at the pack whose collective bellies were creating a steady rumbling hum. “Perhaps it would be best if we all went together? It’s just a zoo after-all.”

“Yeah, plus we’ve been there before, and you haven’t!” This seemed to settle the debate for Grace. The Mariner shook his head, outmanoeuvred and more than slightly annoyed.

Dropping anchor, lowering the sails and preparing the row-boat took more time than anticipated. Already irritated, the Mariner was vexed by how stubborn the ship was behaving. Tasks that had previously been performed so easily, as if the ship chose to do them herself, now proved a chore; long, almost back-breaking work. And even once they were completed an additional delay presented itself: persuading Grace they couldn’t take all of the devils with them.

“They are the guardians of the Neptune. They can’t come with us.”

“But I promised!”

Is this what it’s like, wondered the Mariner, to live with other human beings? Them putting up resistance to every sane suggestion you make?

“Okay, okay. You can take four with you this time. Perhaps others later.”

Grace spent some time calculating which devils to bring along, seemingly by tallying up various small indiscretions in her head and grading each animal on its good behaviour. “Holly! Basil! Percy! Hedgehog!”

Much to the Mariner’s increasing frustration the four beasts responded to her call instantly and allowed themselves to be picked up and placed in the boat. Each in turn snuggled down obediently, looking up at the sour Mariner with a smug expression on their fox-like features. “Bloody stupid names.”

“Arf!”

“How do you think it came back?” McConnell was asking questions again as the small row-boat finally hit the shore. It came to a jarring halt as it slid up the short beach, a generous portion of wave spilling over the stern.

The Mariner shook his head at the reverend’s question, professing ignorance.

“But you brought it didn’t you?” McConnell’s eyes searched the Mariner’s face for an answer. “Grace said you remembered and then it appeared?”

"I didn't-," the Mariner stopped, not wanting to share the revelations he'd felt, yet wanting the conversation to end. "I was remembering something else. I've never been to a zoo before."

What could he say? In that moment, standing upon the dock of Sighisoara, back turned to the burning remains of his one chance at rehabilitation, he had not remembered the zoo at all. He'd been remembering... what? Intimacy? Love? Whatever it was, he struggled to recall it now.

"You've never been to a zoo?!" Grace exclaimed, listening despite running up the beach. She shook her head disapprovingly. "Oh dear, oh deary me."

The four accompanying devils each hopped out of the boat and began sniffing about the sand, leaving criss-crossing tracks as they scouted. McConnell helped the Mariner drag the boat further up the bank to a spot where it would be safe from the tide. The reverend fell silent, worried and disappointed by the Mariner's lack of clarity.

"Let's go! Let's go!"

"Grace!" the Mariner snapped, his anxiety once again surfacing as irritation. He lifted a finger to his mouth. *Shhh*.

The island was quiet, but not silent. A constant chatter of birds filled the canopy, their light chirping disarming, and although the young girl's plea had been startlingly loud, she'd failed to interrupt the chorus. High above, a parrot dressed in glorious reds and greens glided lazily, totally unperturbed by the island's new guests.

That'll soon change, the Mariner thought as he looked from the bird to his devils, who left long trails of drool beside their paw-prints.

The sand bank was small, no more than a short break amidst large outcrops of boulders, straddled by decaying vegetation. Further inland, the sand petered out into dry brown shade, beneath tall leafy trees and beyond them were the first cages Grace had spoken of, bars stretched out like spiders legs.

Suddenly, rising up through the canopy, echoed a chortling insane scream, lingering somewhere between a laugh and a wail. Fuelled by adrenaline, the Mariner drew his Mauser, pointing it into the shadows, searching for whatever madman had caused the sound. Only after squinting rapidly through all possible ambush points, did he notice his companions had made no similar reaction; Grace raised an eyebrow as if he were the one insane, and McConnell thinly concealed his mirth.

“It’s just a monkey.”

“A what?” The Mariner remained alert despite feeling increasingly foolish.

“A monkey, you know, oooh ooh ooh!” Grace turned her arms around until each reached into an armpit and hopped from foot to foot. Now it was the Mariner’s turn to presume madness.

Grace continued her impression, much to the confusion of the devils who were watching her with with interest, backing away as if she were an erratic echidna.

“Are they dangerous?”

“Not usually.” McConnell patted the Mariner’s shoulder. “I think you can put your gun away.”

“He’s right, you know.” The voice came from the rocks to their side and surprised even the devils. A man in grey robes sat watching them, stillness disguising him throughout their arrival. “You won’t need a weapon here.”

“Who are you?” The Mariner stepped forward and pointed his gun at the robed fellow. McConnell moved quickly to Grace, protectively putting his arms around her.

“Do you make a habit of entering people’s homes and demanding to know who they are?” the stranger asked, completely unconcerned by the gun aimed at his head. “Surely it would be more appropriate to first introduce *yourself*?”

“Do you make a habit of pissing off those who are armed?” the Mariner snorted, though equally this further threat failed to draw any reaction other than a patient smile.

It was McConnell who broke the stalemate, stepping around Grace and approaching the grey-robed figure. “I am the reverend McConnell, and this here is Grace Tetrzzini. We are from Sighisoara, the town this zoo used to be a part of. This man with us is the captain of the Neptune. We have come in peace and in the spirit of exploration. We mean you no harm.”

“I am pleased to meet you, reverend.” The robed man stood up and looked at each in turn. “Young lady. Captain.”

“Hi.” Grace gave a hesitant wave, but the Mariner refused to lower his guard.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Pryce, and on behalf of my people, I welcome you to our island.”

"It's *our* island!" Having decided that this man was of no threat, Grace felt at ease offering the challenge.

Pryce nodded diplomatically. "Maybe it *was* young lady, and if so, it shall be again. Just as it is that after your future custodianship it will once more return to ours, and so on and so forth. Such is our doom. Such is our fate."

"How long have you lived here?"

"I don't know," Pryce shrugged. "Some time. I've never heard of this 'Sighisoara' you speak of, does that help?"

"A little."

"I am pleased to be bringing you so much understanding." Pryce sighed contently and looked out across the waves, pleased with his contribution.

"Why aren't you afraid?" The Mariner's hostility broke the friendly atmosphere McConnell had nurtured. Pryce, his attention reluctantly drawn back from the ocean, looked at the Mariner with momentarily weary eyes.

"I *am* afraid. We all are. Who could live in a world this awful and not be? But with all the horrors of a world gone mad, should I really be afraid of a bullet in a gun? A man running from a wolf, is not going to jump at the sight of a spider, now is he?"

Grace piped up. "What if it was poisonous?"

"Then that would be a quick death, rather than the long hunt." He walked slowly towards the Mariner, looking into his eyes, ignoring the Mauser completely. "The truth is, captain, that I am not afraid because we've met before."

“I’ve never met you.”

“Oh yes you have,” Pryce made a smile that, although brimming with warmth and comfort, cooled the Mariner to his guts. “Countless times.” And, as if that settled the whole debate, Pryce turned and began walking up the beach towards the trees. “Come,” he called. “The Lady will wish to speak with you.”

The three were left standing in the sand behind, unsure whether to follow or not. Grace and McConnell looked to the Mariner for guidance, until he finally shrugged, holstered his weapon and began to follow. The devils too took this as a sign they could further explore and dashed ahead into the foliage.

Grinning, Grace once again exerted her motherly authority, “Percy! You behave, you hear?” But already they were gone, giddy with fresh scents and strange sounds, yapping and tumbling about in the leaves.

“What interesting creatures you bring. Any relation to the raccoon?” Pryce asked as they strolled.

The Mariner increased his pace until he was by the monk’s side. “They’re Tasmanian devils. The rest of the brood are back on the Neptune.” He thought carefully about what he wanted to share with Pryce; what exactly did he want this stranger to know? “They have made exceptional guards,” he finally chose to add.

“I don’t doubt it.”

“Grace said this was a zoo for animals. Do you not have any devils here?”

“I don’t know what this place used to be like, but when we arrived there was just..”

The Mariner waited for a moment for Pryce to finish, but the silence continued. “Just what?”

Pryce was staring off into space, not in a trance, but as if he was concentrating on solving an impossibly difficult mathematical equation. His eyes flicked back and forth and the faintest of whispered words graced his lips.

“Are you alright?”

As if in a fit, Pryce dropped to the floor and began to thrash.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaa! Wheeeeeeee! Dagagaga!”

The Mariner threw himself away, tangling in a bush, trying to put some distance between him and the madman. The branches scraped at his skin, slowing his grasp for the Mauser.

“Mindless! He’s gone Mindless!”

McConnell’s face drained of colour and Grace screamed, but neither fled. There was something mesmerising about the strange display.

“Awwoooo! Awwoooo! A-”

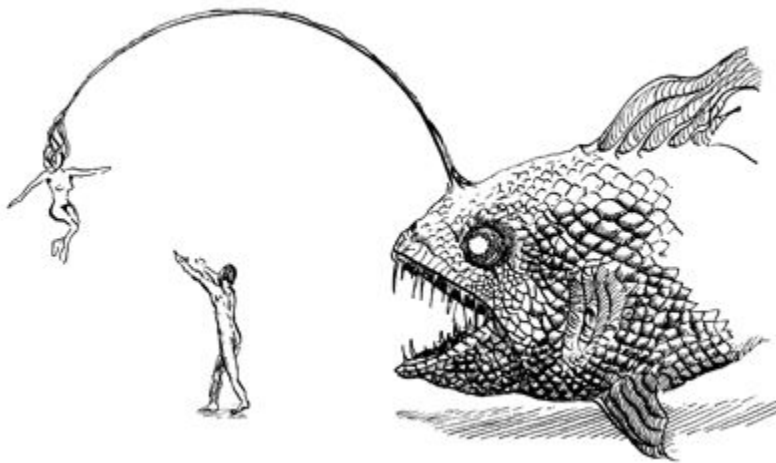
Just as suddenly as he’d started, Pryce stopped thrashing and screaming and sat up. Rather than the rage-filled face of a Mindless, his was racked with disappointment. “Bugger.”

Trembling with adrenaline filling his veins, the Mariner held out his hand. Pryce accepted it and rose to his feet.

“What just happened? I thought you’d turned Mindless. I was about to put a bullet in your head!”

Pryce looked sheepishly at his startled guests.

“My apologies for scaring you, but I had no choice. You see, I was trying to save the world.”



26

THE SHIFT SEEKERS

BEFORE HIS VERBAL AND PHYSICAL explosion, Pryce had been about to inform his guests that whatever variety of beasts that had once lived within the zoo, all that remained were birds that came and went as they pleased and a colony of monkeys. The small humanoids followed the three strangers as they were led through the trees and empty cages. Occasionally, one would scamper over, probably intending to beg the strangers for food, but the devils gave firm growls, keeping the primates at bay.

As they wound further towards the zoo’s centre they spotted many of Pryce’s fellow islanders dressed in similar garb and each with the same serene expressions. These, however,

were the only similarities shared. Age, sex and ethnicity varied widely and, like the monkeys, they watched from a distance, content with their idle curiosity without any motivation to intrude. They merely observed and then got back to tending crops.

The zoo felt more like an ancient kingdom than a centre for conservation. Plants had grown up around the dilapidated structures and rusty bars. Some had been preserved, though now converted for the monks' use. McConnell peered inside what used to be an aquarium and saw the tanks drained and filled with candles. The floor was littered with rugs which monks sat upon in quiet contemplation. Other buildings hadn't fared so well and had fallen under the thrall of the forest. Crumbled walls teemed with insects and fungi.

Finally, at the centre of the zoo, they came to an enormous pool. Straddling it was a wooden bridge leading to a small central platform supporting two enormous statues of dolphins, elongated faces majestic and noble. Under their shade sat a woman upon a wooden throne. She was large and imposing, and although she dressed in the same way as her followers, in simple grey cloth, she wore them as if they were the gowns of royalty.

"I was expecting you. Come!" she commanded, and the three were led across the bridge until they stood before her. The devils remained behind, unwilling to get near the clear pool, pacing back and forth nervously, faint mewing sounds in their throats.

Pryce bowed deeply. "Priestess, allow me to present the Reverend McConnell, Grace Tetrzzini and their guide, the Captain of the mighty Neptune!"

“Do you have a name?” the Priestess asked the Mariner with a smile.

“No. Do you?”

At this she laughed. “Very well. Thank you Pryce, that will be all.” Pryce nodded and departed, retreating back across the bridge and sitting with the devils who watched anxiously. “I am Diane Thyre, and it is my divine duty to guide the Monks of Déjà vu to their destiny.”

“The Monks of what?” McConnell, despite his earlier conciliatory nature, was becoming agitated by the culture about them. “That’s not a religion I’ve heard of.”

“We transcend religion, Reverend. This is about truth, not faith.”

“Christianity is the truth. We live in the end of days, the Shattering, God’s punishment for our sins!”

Diane suddenly burst into laughter, raising a hand to stifle her giggles. Her mockery sent McConnell bright red. “Is that what you think? Oh you poor man, what God would do this? Oh no. It were no God.”

“Then what did?” he growled.

“My good sir, a demon of course! A demon did this. Our world’s in the clasp of a creature not native to our own. It exists beyond our sight, beyond comprehension, taking us one by one. Destroying all we hold dear.”

“The Wasp?”

Her superior laughter stopped dead in her throat and Diane turned her attention to the Mariner. His studious expression

held and did not waiver.

"I don't know," she said. "Demons do not have a need for names, names are things of man. Yet this one sounds... familiar." Her thoughts congregated into a deep frown, but then a moment later she shrugged them off with ease. "What am I saying? Of course it would! We have met many times and you have told me this before. Please, sit, and I shall explain."

The day was warm and pleasant and the three found no problem at all sitting in the grass and listening to the lady speak. Even McConnell, who'd taken exception to his own faith being discounted so quickly, listened in silence.

"Imagine the tale of your life as a wheel," she began. "It is written from conception to death along the entire circumference. It contains all your achievements, all your failures. Hopes and dreams are painted there, just as your betrayals, travels, loves and losses. It seems so important to you, this journey you make as the wheel turns, but it is not. For the wheel continues turning, playing your life over and over. You're born, you die, you're born again, and with each revolution, you forget all that has come before, only to play out the exact same life, over and over, down to the precise thought.

"Except, we don't quite forget *everything*," she said, eyes lighting up. "Sometimes memories of these past cycles creep in, they seep through into our consciousness. These are the experiences known as Déjà vu. As Déjà vu unfolds, you remember the exact experience, the movements you make, the thoughts you think, the moment in its entirety."

The Mariner nodded along with her story. He'd observed such moments before, the feeling of experiencing something

for a second time, not any particularly important event, just going about his duties upon the Neptune. It was curious to learn the name for such a thing.

“Now let’s return to this wheel that is our life,” she continued, clearly pleased to have an audience. “Imagine that it is not a wheel of a cart, but a cog in a clock. Your cog is connected to my cog, as is mine to many others. We are all tiny cogs repeating over and over, driving one much larger. This great cog is time itself, our reality, our events. Somehow a demon has manipulated this cog, he’s taken it within his grip and has dragged us off course, into misery and despair.

“But there is one way we can wrestle it from his hands. We need to send a shock-wave, a jolt, a *shift*, through the many to the main, juddering the great cog back onto its proper course.”

“And how is that done?” the Mariner asked. “It seems this ‘Cog’ is not something we can touch or feel. How do we shift it?”

“Through *Déjà vu*,” she replied, body puffed up like a toad. “If we can change our turn of the wheel, be it on the second or billionth revolution, if for the first time in these cycles we do something different, then this will send a jolt from our wheel, through the entire machine, shifting the Great Cog back onto its proper course!”

Diane examined each of their faces, eager for their response. McConnell, though enjoying the story, remained unconvinced, unlike Grace whose mouth hung open in wonder. The Mariner was somewhere between, sceptical yet curious. “What’s the problem then? Just do it so we can have our lives back.”

She shook her head sadly. “No-one has yet managed to. I counsel my followers to do anything, the more unpredictable the better, to change the present experience from the course set by their returning memory. So when Déjà vu strikes they shriek, leap, roll, sing, anything as long as it’s as random as they can conceive. The problem is the memory returns just as they act, and in retrospect it always turns out they remember shrieking, leaping, rolling and singing. Never once has this revolution proved different. But one day someone will manage it, and the world will be saved.

“Obviously, the more within our flock attempting this miracle, the more likely we are to succeed. That is why you shall join us.”

“We shall?!” McConnell snorted.

“Of course. You must and you will.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I used to live within a community of salvagers; we sailed the seas looking for wrecks. We’d strip them for parts and trade for food and drink. One day we were hit by a terrible storm. Great waves threatened to swallow us into the depths, but we managed to work as a team to keep afloat. I doubt the fear I felt shall ever be matched. Just as I thought we’d escaped the worst, a bolt of lightning tore the sky and spiked right through me.

“But rather than die, I was given a vision. I saw the demon, I saw his claws gripping our world. In that fleeting moment, I saw The Cog and understood what had to be done.

“When I came to, I helped my friends navigate out of the tempest, but I could no longer remain in their company. I had changed, and from that day onwards I devoted my

efforts to spreading the word of my calling. Soon, those who could see the truth joined my side. We found this island and made it our home. The Monks of Déjà vu now live in quiet contemplation and self-sufficiency, each doing their part to bring about the salvation of all."

"With your blessing," the Mariner said solemnly, "we shall remain with you, and do our bit to bring about the Shift you speak of."

"I am pleased!" Diane beamed at them. It was impossible not to return the grin, even McConnell, who thought the whole thing lunacy, flashed his best in response. "Pryce!" she called across the water to her waiting subject. "Prepare some lodgings for our new brothers and sister, for they have heard the calling!"

Pryce bowed low and set off with a skip in his step.

"Now I must be getting back to contemplation. As the original *seer* it is I who am most likely to shift the Cog, so sadly I have to dedicate much of my own time to inner concentration. Fear not though, nothing so exhausting will be expected of you in the immediate future. More appropriate and less taxing tasks will be assigned."

Finally she rose and the three stood with her. "On behalf of our little community I welcome you, for the first, the second, the billionth and perhaps, with a little luck, the final time."

As the three walked away, Grace skipping ahead with the devils (overjoyed to be reunited with her), McConnell and the Mariner spoke in hasty and hushed tones.

"We can't stay here!"

“Why not? You knew we were headed for the zoo, and here we are. It returned for a reason.”

“Yes, but not this! Not.. that!” McConnell waved a hand in the direction of Diane who was reclining in her throne and eating a mango.

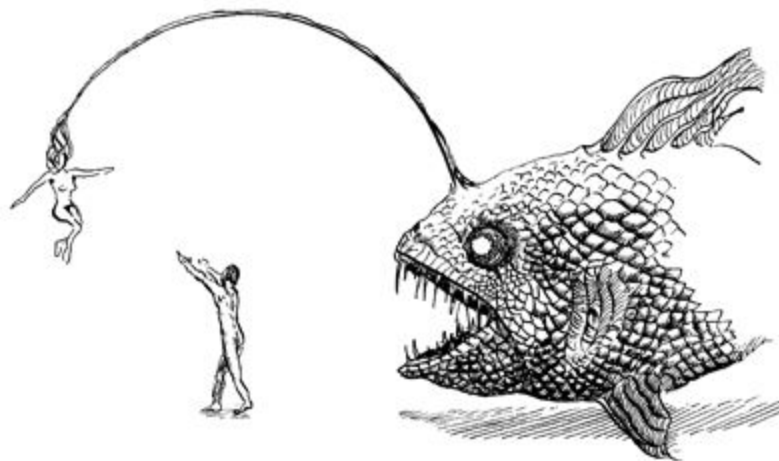
“Then what?”

“I don’t know!”

“Then we stay, at least until we have a better idea of what’s going on.”

“Don’t tell me you believe that mumbo jumbo?”

“I don’t know what to believe.” In this the Mariner spoke with complete honesty, and once again his thoughts returned to his dream and the warning of the Wasp. “My head, as ever, is empty.”



AFTER BEING SHOWN THEIR LODGINGS, each were assigned a set of chores; McConnell instructed to patrol fruit trees, a bounty demanding constant supervision to keep pilfering monkeys at bay, whilst Grace and the Mariner were put to work watering several large vegetables plots. The scale of production was impressive given the limited space and local primates.

Before they'd settled into their daily tasks, the Mariner had returned to the Neptune with the four devils and a selection of dried meats. Grace had complained at her pets' removal from the zoo, but the Mariner was adamant that they needed them to remain on the ship to keep it secure. This was mostly true, though his main concern was the damage they could wreak upon the zoo if left unchecked. The devils didn't seem to mind much. Their disappointment at being separated from Grace was eclipsed by their greed, loyalty forgotten as meat was dropped before their snouts.

"If anyone else comes aboard," the Mariner said as they munched furiously and clamoured about the deck, "eat the bastards."

Returning to the zoo, he found Grace already at work, using a watering-can to sprinkle rows of cabbages.

"Heya," she said, turning to look at him and shielding her eyes from the sun. "Are they happy?"

For a moment he was perplexed by the question, the notion of the animals' happiness being alien to his way of thinking. "Oh, sure. You bet."

"Good. I hope we can find them a nice home here. They'd like to chase the monkeys."

And kill them, thought the Mariner, though he kept this charming addition to himself.

“How’s the work going?”

“Alright,” she said. “A bit boring. Water this, water that. Are we going to have to do this for long?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps. Isn’t this better than Sighisoara?”

“Oh yes, there weren’t any monkeys in Sighisoara.”

“What do you think of Diane?”

“She’s nice. A little kooky, but nice.”

“A little... kooky,” he repeated, contemplating the analysis. “Grace, do you like it here?”

She thought about it for a second, before nodding, her hair bouncing with enthusiasm. To his surprise, this pleased the Mariner immensely; bringing comfort to the girl relaxed him somehow. A peculiar sensation, being concerned for the well-being of another.

They worked together in silence, walking through the crops, sprinkling water as they went and taking regular breaks to refill at the well. Despite the monotony of the work, the Mariner found it strangely compelling; he was encouraging life, what was better than that? The afternoon passed swiftly, and when Grace spoke again, the Mariner was surprised to find the sun low in the sky.

“I don’t like what he calls me.”

“Who?”

"The reverend. He calls me Miss. Tetrazzini. But that's not my name."

"You don't like it?"

"It's not my name! It's the one *he* gave me, but it wasn't my real one." She spat the reference to her former guardian with venom, though melancholy rushed up behind. "I don't know what my real name is."

"That makes two of us."

"You *really* don't have a name?"

"Really."

Grace forced a slight smile, though her head still hung low.

"I'll tell you what," the Mariner said, desperate to please the child, though for the life of him didn't know why he should care. "We'll come up with names for each other. You'll take on one and so will I. How's that?"

The suggestion didn't go down as well as he'd hoped. "You can't just make up a name! Your name is whatever your daddy gives you... your *real* dad at least."

"Well I don't know about that, but if I call you by your new name, and you call me by mine, who's to say different? Let's give it a go. You can keep Grace, that's a lovely name, but how about we change it to something more suitable? Grace *Devil-Tamer*?"

"That's stupid."

"Oh." The put-down made him feel oddly dejected; this was going to be tougher than first anticipated. "Ok, let's start

with me instead; what do you think a man like me should be called?"

Grace studied the Mariner's face: stubble cheeks patch-worked by scars, grey eyes made even paler by the dark rings that surrounded them, long dark hair knotted and unkempt. No nice name sprung to mind.

She giggled, scrunched up her nose and shook her head. "I don't know, I can't think of any."

"Keep trying. You named all those devils, I should be easy."

"Ummm."

He patiently waited while the girl screwed her face into different bizarre masks as she struggled for inspiration.

"Well, you're a sailor..."

"A Mariner. I prefer the term, 'Mariner'," said the Sailor.

"So, as you go about in a boat a lot, you need an appropriately seafaring name... Ahab?"

"A- Hab?"

"Yeah, er... you not heard of him?"

The Mariner shook his head, baffled. "Does it sound like me?"

"Not really.."

"Oh."

Frowning, Grace tried to pick the Mariner's sparse mind. "Close your eyes and concentrate. What name feels right to

you?”

The Mariner thought hard. What had at first been a distracting game, now seemed something he should see through. One name floated out of the mists.

“Donald. Donald Traill.”

Grace shivered. “I don’t like that one.”

“No,” the Mariner slowly agreed, wondering just how that name had arrived in his consciousness. There indeed was something grim about it, though why a name should carry anything other than syllables was beyond him. “I don’t either.”

And then a second name arrived, less filthy than the one before.

“Arthur Philip?”

“Arthur. Arthur. Art.” Grace grinned. “Yeah!”

Art Philip, seafarer, bold adventurer! Still a bit baffled by his own inspiration, the Mariner now turned the attention back to Grace. “Your turn.”

“Oww I don’t know...”

She began to complain, but the Mariner interjected. “If I can do it, so can you.”

“Well, I read this book and there was a character inside that I really liked.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yeah, she was called Scarlett O’Hara. I would like that name.”

“The whole thing?”

“Yeah.”

“I think you should hang onto ‘Grace’ though, it’s very nice.”

“Hmm.” She thought about it, mulling over the pros and cons. “Ok, I’ll hang onto ‘Grace’. Grace O’Hara! Hey! Perhaps my middle name could be Scarlett? Oh fiddle-de-dee!”

Beaming with joy, Grace returned to her duties, humming and happily muttering gibberish. “Tomorrow is another day! Oh fiddle-de-dee!”

The Mariner watched her for a moment, enjoying himself for the first time in his memorable life. His chest felt lighter, the ache in his arms less oppressive. Eventually he got back to watering the plants, and found he rather enjoyed that too.

Later, as the sun fell below the tree-line, dropping the zoo into a hastily fading twilight, the Mariner made his way back to the small hut promised to function as his new home. It wasn’t much, a roof over an old salvaged mattress, a small makeshift table and several candles. He’d only looked at it briefly, and at the time had found it Spartan to say the least. Now, however, it had a new addition: McConnell, sitting at the desk waiting for his return.

“How did the monkey-guarding go?” he asked as he collapsed on the bed. It squealed harshly under his weight and a loose spring jabbed him vengefully in the lower-back, but it was a bed nonetheless.

“With difficulty,” McConnell grumbled mournfully. “They showed a surprising degree of cooperation. One would distract me whilst another grabbed as much as it could lay its dirty paws on. I can only presume there’s a chief monkey somewhere on this island masterminding the whole operation.”

“Possibly, possibly.” The Mariner closed his eyes and stretched his weary legs.

“You must have impressed them somehow – you’ve got a desk. I didn’t get a desk. A mattress and a door, that’s it.”

“Is that why you’re here? If you want your own desk you can take the damn thing.”

His sarcasm was followed by silence and it made the Mariner reopen his eyes. McConnell watched him intently, candlelight illuminating his serious features.

Unnerved, the Mariner tried to keep the conversation on safe grounds. “I was speaking with Grace today, we’ve chosen new names for ourselves. The doctor wasn’t her father, she’d been abducted when very small, so her real name is unknown. She’s chosen O’Hara. It’s from some book she likes. It took some working out, but we got there, Would you like to know my new name?”

“I know your name.”

The Mariner tensed. Something within him sickened. “I don’t have a name.”

Traill, the sickness whispered.

“How could you possibly know something that doesn’t exist?”

"I've known it for days."

"Rubbish." *Don't say it*, the Mariner thought, desperation beginning to show. *Don't say 'Donald Traill'!*

"Deep down, both you and I know it."

I'm Arthur Phillip! Art Phillip! I'm not Donald Traill!

McConnell's eyes were as piercing as the revelation he was about to make, though when he finally delivered his declaration, it had not the toll of doom the Mariner had expected.

"You're Jesus Haych Christ. Our Saviour."

If the previous silences between them had been uncomfortable, this one was nigh unbearable.

"What?"

"You are the son of God, who was cast out into the eternal waves to pay for our sins. He who built a ship upon which to gather the saved."

"I built a ship?"

"Yes, that ship!" McConnell pointed in the direction of the moored Neptune, though in the tight confines of the room the gesture merely managed to knock over a candle. He grasped for it whilst he spoke. "The vessel that is one with you! The ship that will find all those worthy of being saved!"

"The Neptune?"

"Yes!"

"I didn't build the Neptune. I just.. woke up on it."

“The Devil has deceived you,” McConnell said as a matter-of-fact. “He’s made you forget, just as he’s convinced you of all these terrible things you believe of yourself. They are lies, all of them, lies!”

“McConnell,” the Mariner said calmly, trying to placate the over-excited reverend. “I don’t even know who this Jesus Haych is. I remember that display in your church, but not very well. I’m not Jesus. I’m a mariner, nothing more.”

McConnell carried on regardless. “Our Saviour was followed by twelve disciples.”

“Well, I can assure you, I don’t have anything close to a disciple!”

“You do. And you have twelve.”

When he finally caught up with what McConnell was getting at, the Mariner laughed. The sound made the reverend recoil, and the Mariner could almost have felt sorry for the man, had it not been such a preposterous suggestion.

“They are *not* disciples! They are vicious overgrown rats who would devour both of us if they could get by without someone to shovel their shit into the sea! Beasts! Monsters!”

“Of which number twelve.”

“That means nothing!”

“By itself, I agree. But I’ve seen all the proof there is. You sewed some of the world together. You undid a part of the Shattering. God punished us by splitting our world apart. Only Jesus can piece it back together. Only he.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Who else was it? I was there. I saw.”

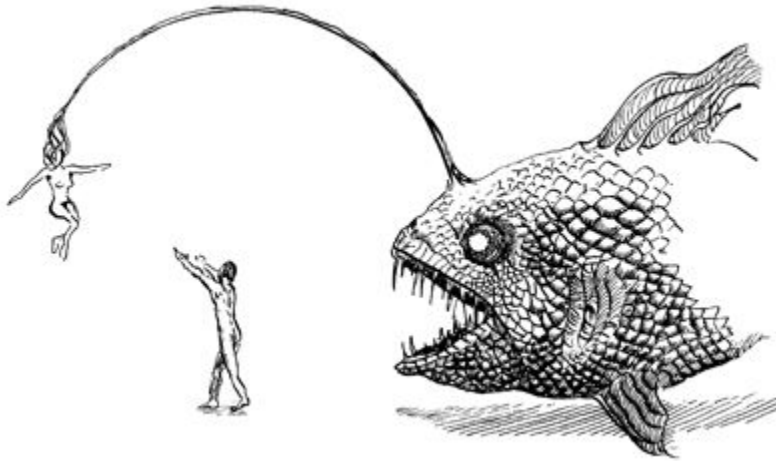
“If that’s the reason you got aboard, you’ve made a big mistake.”

“We’ll see,” McConnell stood, eyes still aflame. “And the sooner you abandon this cult the better. You won’t find any answers with them, the answers are within you. They have been all along.”

Once McConnell left, the Mariner lay awake for several hours. He felt bad for McConnell, the man was mistaken and the misconception had evolved into outright delusion. But was it any *more* crazy than what was being preached on this island? Jesus Haych Christ on one side, Déjà vu on the other. And somewhere between, still out of sight – the Wasp.

Concentration began to wane as he felt his addictions creeping back. His inner demons had been kept at bay by the distractions of the day, but in the dark confines of his own mind they slithered into prominence, tempting, taunting, tormenting.

Fortunately he’d kept the cat ‘o’ nine tails close, and he knew just what to do.



28

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

SOMETHING OF A ROUTINE FORMED during the subsequent days. By sunlight the three would perform mundane tasks in exchange for food, shelter and guidance supplied by the cult, though when it came to guidance there was little, if none. For the time being they were told to observe the other monks and learn from their example. Not even Grace, who'd been the most believing, could see anything to learn from watching others randomly burst into song, gibberish, or dropping to the ground doing squat-thrusts. Indeed, at times it felt like they were living within an insane asylum, if not for how rational and calm the inmates acted between spells of *déjà vu*.

Of Diane they saw almost nothing. Only once did the Mariner speak to her again, and only the briefest of exchanges. It was on a morning when he was asked to help prepare food, mostly chopping and de-seeding fruit and veg. Megan, a young lady who seemed to be in charge of the kitchen, carefully took him through the various dishes that could be easily prepared and in the quantities necessary.

Cooking for such a large community required an astonishing amount of foresight, but fortunately Megan had all that in hand, and all the Mariner had to do was follow basic orders. Mostly the work was washing and chopping, though somehow he could never get the sizes quite right and was regularly admonished.

“No, no, no!” Megan said, pulling the knife from his grasp. “You’re squashing them!”

He looked down at the tomatoes. “I thought I was chopping them.”

“Well that’s certainly what I asked you to do,” she snapped again, pushing him aside. “Take the Priestess her plate. I’ve prepared it, all you need do is deliver it. You can’t get that wrong.”

The plate was a large silver disk, piled high with the choicest fruits. He carried it as carefully as he could, though clearly not careful enough from the concerned glances he received.

He found Diane sitting on a small beach on the north side of the island. She was sitting with her feet stretched out, the incoming tide gently lapping across her toes.

Diane looked up from a book she was reading. “Hello captain. How are you finding our little community?”

“Very pleasant.” he replied, handing the plate to her. She took it, eyes feasting upon the fruits carefully arranged for sampling. Like a spider on a thread, her fingers dangled above the delicacies, wiggling in anticipation. The actions had a curious elation to them, despite the serious look on her face.

“Your arrival heralds much, captain,” she began, drawing her eyes away from the plate and onto him. “Were you aware the stars vanished just before you came to our island? Literally dark times ahead, I fear.”

He was surprised. “You remember them?”

“The stars? Of course I do, why wouldn’t I? I thought they might come back, but they haven’t. Did *you* scare them off perhaps?”

“I’m as in the dark as you are.”

“Ha! Pun for pun! Yes indeed.” The words were spat with little mirth and her eyes darted along the horizon, only lightly flicking higher, as if to gaze too long at the sky would bring its great weight tumbling down. “My people are strong; we are used to the strange tides of our world and know not to openly panic about such things. To panic is to declare yourself to predators, isn’t that so? But under the calm I can feel them thinking. *Wondering*. Just where have the stars all gone?”

The Mariner had no answer, and he watched her pop a slice of apple into her mouth and chew. The dark mood upon Diane lifted, momentary joy passing across her lips.

“Wonderful! I was just growing weary. Please take some yourself.”

Despite the offer, Diane didn’t hold the plate any closer to her guest, instead keeping it firmly on her lap.

“What were you growing weary of?”

“It is tiresome, focusing all your energies to connect with the forces of *Déjà vu*; trying to shift the Cog, day in, day out.” Theatrically, Diane lifted a hand to her brow, leaning her

head back as if her psychic strength was being tested. Somehow it seemed preposterous, given that she sat upon a calm beach eating fruit.

"I see," he said, traces of sarcasm peeking through as he noticed the well-thumbed romance novel tucked beneath her leg.

Diane saw him looking and indignantly puffed herself up. "When you become as practised as I in dealing with the *déjà vu*, you start to sense situations in which you can confront it. Today I knew, I *sensed*, that I would connect to my previous lives through reading this book." Defensively, she held the book aloft as if it were a shield, rather than a luxury item she'd deemed to hide. "Just as I knew that I would confront *déjà vu* when eating this fruit. Even now I am struggling against a *déjà vu* in this very conversation. It is *most* exhausting."

The glare he was subjected to told him to leave it, but the illogic couldn't remain untested. "If you sensed that you would confront a *déjà vu* whilst reading that book, why didn't you do something else instead? Wouldn't that have the same effect as challenging it once it had started?"

"Absolutely not," she sniffed. "The key is to break *déjà vu* as it occurs, not run away from the experience. Trying to shift the Cog by acting on 'feelings' is completely impractical, they may merely be feelings after all."

"Quite."

Diane narrowed her eyes and gave him a haughty look before turning away. "Now, if you would excuse me, I have to get back to work." At that she picked up her book and began to read, ending their conversation with icy silence.

That was the closest he got to being schooled in the ways of the monks. Grace, whilst being enthusiastic about living in the zoo, had no intention of being silly like the shift seekers. McConnell was outright hostile to the idea, yet he still carried out his chores to the letter. Like the Mariner, he enjoyed seeing Grace content, and was willing to swallow his religious zeal to make it happen. McConnell and the Mariner didn't speak again of the reverend's suspicions, though McConnell watched him closely in the days that followed, seeking for a clue into the Mariner's thoughts.

Diane's memory of the stars had surprised him. He'd assumed because McConnell had forgotten them, so would everyone else, but then he reminded himself that Grace had remembered the zoo, whilst Tetrazzini hadn't. Was the process random? Was it a disease, striking indiscriminately as Tetrazzini had eluded?

He'd tested the theory with the resident cook Megan, approaching the conversation carefully, with enough space to back away if he sensed trouble.

"Diane and I had a little chat when I delivered the fruit."

"Oh yes? You are fortunate, it's rare to be allowed to converse with the Priestess privately."

"It was only brief," he said, approaching the topic whilst bracing himself for the slightest hint at trouble. "We were discussing how difficult it's been to see at night recently.."

She turned to him, speaking low, her manner like that of a rabbit that had seen a hawk. "Where have they gone? Henry thinks it's a gas in the air, something thick enough to keep the light out. I think it might be a sign though, you know, of the déjà vu beginning to crack? We must be getting close. That's it isn't it? Good news?"

He nodded thoughtfully, and under her desperate and fearful gaze felt the need to reassure her, even though no assurance could be given. "Yes," he lied. "That's probably it."

Twice a day the Mariner would visit the Neptune and check on the devils. In the morning he'd travel with Grace, allowing her time to play with and feed them. Every visit they would greet her like excited puppies, all scrabbling for her affection. Whilst she entertained them, the Mariner took the time to check on the ship for signs of intrusion. He never found any. It seemed the monks were content to let the ship remain unexplored.

The second daily visit was made in secret. Just after sundown, while the sky still had a glow about it, he would row by lantern and spend an hour alone. It was there, within the tight confines of the ship, that he liked to keep his thoughts in check, sometimes by whip, other times by knife. There was no desperation to the act, nor any masochistic enjoyment, it was merely a routine distraction. During the day the welts and wounds would throb, but this was the intent; it kept him focused. But throughout all the self-mutilation, he never strayed the blade to his face, neck or hands. Self-harm was a private affair.

If asked, he would have said they'd been on the island for two weeks before his infamous talk with Pryce, when their spell of peace would come to an abrupt end, though in all honesty it could have been longer. Unlike Tetrizzini, no-one on the island had much call to keep track of time, and one day merged into the other.

It was on a return trip from the Neptune, in the dead of night, whilst his back slowly seeped blood into his shirt, that

the Mariner heard Pryce call to him from the pitch black, starless night.

“Captain? Is that you?”

Surprised, the Mariner turned in the direction of the voice, holding his small lamp aloft.

“I’m over here! On the rock. Come closer, and bring that light!”

Following the instructions, the Mariner found Pryce’s smiling face amidst the gloom, sitting in the same spot they’d first found him.

“Well met, my friend!”

“What are you doing out here?” the Mariner asked, a little annoyed and embarrassed at being caught during his secret routine.

“Just thinking. It’s so peaceful out here. I often like to get away from the crowd, the hustle and bustle! It’s so hectic in the camp.”

The Mariner nodded, humouring Pryce, though he couldn’t have conceived of a quieter existence than among the monks.

“How’s trying to save the world?” the Mariner asked, grinning. Pryce laughed in return.

“Unsuccessful, but we will get there. I wonder what the world will be like once it’s returned to its correct path? Will this island exist? Will civilisation be rebuilt? One thing I’m certain of though: it will be wonderful!”

Pryce gesticulated theatrically as he spoke, and the Mariner happily sat next to him in the darkness, their legs illuminated by the lantern. Somewhere in the blackness in front he could hear the waves as they broke against the shore.

“Do you really think this world can be wrestled from the hands of the demon?”

“Oh yes,” Pryce said with certainty. “Diane says so. Absolutely.”

“And you trust Diane?”

“Of course. That woman knows more truth than a thousand others put together. A hundred thousand even!”

“And if you don’t accomplish this... *Shift* soon, you will continue here?”

“Until the day I die, and then I will continue in the next life, and the life after that.”

“Working here. *Serving* her.”

He felt Pryce fidget uncomfortably. “Of course.”

“Pryce?”

“Yes?”

“It’s bollocks. You know it. I know it. She’s using you all to serve her. You grow her crops, make her food, protect her. She’s spun these lies to distract you; whilst you hope for this *Shift* you aren’t concerned with the fact that you’re slaves, and until you free yourselves of this nonsense you will

remain trapped forever. Fuck the next life, think about this one.”

He’d expected Pryce to react with horror, rage or even ridicule. Instead the man was quiet and thoughtful.

“But what else is there? What else can we do to fix our lives?”

“McConnell believes we need to find the son of God, who will sew the world together.”

“And you? What do you believe?”

The Mariner took a deep breath. He hadn’t spoken of his calling since Absinth.

“I am looking for an island, an island that holds all the answers. I’ve been looking for it for as long as I remember, and will continue to until I die.”

“How will you know when you find it?”

“Because all this will finally make sense.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“There’s something significant about this zoo, I don’t know what, but there is. For some reason, it came back. We were on Sighisoara and suddenly it appeared within sight.” The Mariner looked into the direction of the populated island they’d sailed from. Nothing, just darkness. “And yet there are no lights. Where are Sighisoara’s lanterns? We should be able to see them, and yet we can’t. We’re separated again, and I don’t know why.”

Pryce reclined, amazingly calm for a man whose belief system was under threat. "For a long time now, I've been coming here at night. I like the solitude, just me and the ocean. Perhaps Sighisoara used to be closer? I say this because I used to be able to look out and see the waves, the pale sand, the outlines of trees. Now it's all just dark."

"No, that wasn't Sighisoara, it were the stars, and now they're gone too."

Pryce was lying across the rock so only his lower legs were made visible by the lantern. They trembled.

Silence followed. "Pryce?"

A low gurgling floated out of the gloom.

"Pryce?"

The stars...

Out of the blackness, the creature that used to be Pryce emerged, all nails and teeth, mad eyes roving wildly like a dying cow's. The Mariner recoiled, yet in this position there was nowhere to retreat. Pryce clawed at his face, drawing blood, thrusting his body on top, using his weight to pin the Mariner down.

"Pryce! Pryce don't do this!"

A mad screeching was emanating from the monk's throat. How had he ever confused the random jabbering of the monks with this? Their noises were random, yet deliberate. The sounds that came from a Mindless were inhuman, as if a foreign body had seized control of the voice box and didn't yet know how it worked.

“Who was Winston Churchill? Who was Winston Churchill?” he screamed, but there was no respite. What had worked on Absinth now failed.

The Mariner was keeping Pryce’s teeth at bay by holding him about the neck with both hands. This however left the monk’s arms free to scratch and claw at the Mariner’s head. He craned back as far as possible, tilting to avoid the fingers as they came dangerously close to his eyes, brushing the lashes. It felt like he was wrestling with a snake, rather than the man that had welcomed him some weeks before.

He had to get his gun. It was there, holstered in his pocket, but how to buy the time to reach for it? He only needed a second, but a second was a luxury he did not have and Pryce’s fingers were inching closer. Something had to be done! With a deep breath, he released one hand from Pryce’s neck and used it to feel for the Mauser. Halving his strength had a disastrous effect; Pryce suddenly lurched closer, fingers reaching the Mariner’s left eye. Tips dug deep, agony flaring inside his head. White and dark lights swirled as he thrashed in agony. The Mauser, only just in his grasp, fell free, making a metallic scratching sound as it slid across the rock into the thick smoke of night.

Pain had a galvanising effect upon the Mariner. He heaved, screaming at the top of his lungs, and pushed Pryce to his side. The man fell onto his back, squirming like a wild animal, thrashes that knocked the lantern over. A brief wavering flicker showed this, and then... nothing.

Partially blinded by the pain in his eye and now totally blinded by the extinguished light, the Mariner scrambled across the stone, trying to put some space between him and the Mindless. He could hear it howling incoherently in its

fury. Fearing the worst, he braced himself for another strike... none came. Pryce was just as blind as he.

The Mariner kept as still and quiet as he could. It took strength of will, but he managed to get his breathing under control. Haggard breaths became shallow; subsequent dizziness unpleasant, but necessary, his chest quivered with the exertion, reluctantly succumbing to his commands.

The feeling of oppression was immense. A strong breeze and sound of waves were the only betrayal that he was outside with space to flee, otherwise he'd think he were trapped deep underground with the Devil itself.

Pryce grew quiet, his growls and hisses subdued. Was his Mindless spell fading, as it had done for Absinth?

Was it over?

Suddenly, the bestial creature was about him, screaming and snarling. Yet the attack was a lucky guess and it seemed to surprise Pryce as much as it had the Mariner. Their limbs tangled in the confusion, both figures once again crumbling to the ground, each trying to pin the other down. A puff of wind against his cheek and a bony snapping sound horribly close, told the story that Pryce was trying to bite his face.

Now it was the Mariner's turn to get some luck. He lashed out, his fist connecting with Pryce's nose. It squashed under the blow, blood squirting out, warm and wet about his fingers. The Mindless creature howled in pain, giving the Mariner just long enough to scramble away in the direction of the extinguished lantern.

He moved quickly, tracing the surface of the rock with his hands. Behind him he could hear Pryce desperately searching, jabbering incoherently. The Mariner knew he

didn't have long, the Mindless would soon hear him and react.

Pryce was getting closer, attacking the night air over and over, hoping to find his victim.

The Mariner kicked something by his feet. It skidded with a familiar metallic scrape.

Pryce roared with triumph and sped towards his position. Only a pace or two away.

One.

Two.

And then he found it! The Mariner grabbed the Mauser off the rock, turning and firing wildly into the dark, Pryce's mad rictus grin revealed in the flashes as the gun vomited hot lead. The first three missed completely, the fourth hit Pryce in the throat, turning his roar into wet deflation. The fifth shattered the man's jaw, cocking his head forward painfully.

If he hadn't felt blind before, the Mariner certainly did after the flashes died, leaving the image of Pryce's imploded face lodged in his brain.

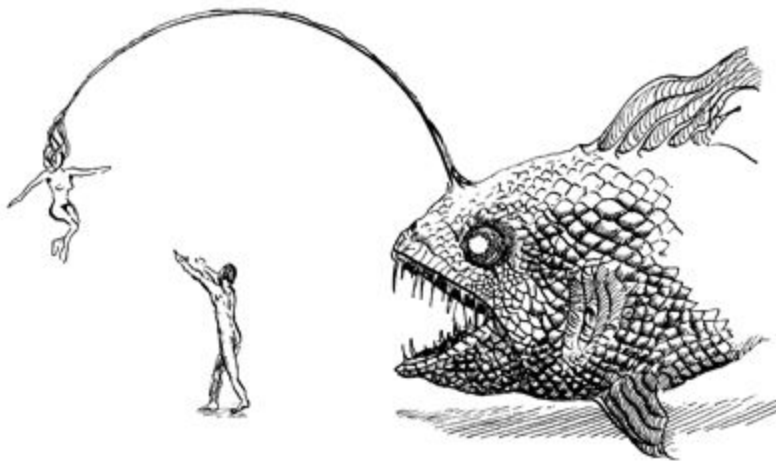
A wet crack followed – the sound of Pryce's head hitting the rock.

Echoes in his mind all that were left.

Exhausted and in pain, the Mariner lowered himself onto the stone. The wind was picking up and it felt cool against his skin. He turned his head into the breeze, tasting the salt in the air. Nearby, Pryce made a last few gurgling sounds as he

died, finally leaving the Mariner alone in the dark with his pain.

He stayed there, unwilling to move and thus risk injuring himself, stretched out by the shore. And it was thus that the monks found him a little while later, lying prone next to an unarmed and very bloody corpse.



29

GETTING TO KNOW ALL ABOUT YOU

ALWAYS ERR ON THE SIDE of caution. That's what the Mariner reminded himself as he was dragged through the overgrown foliage towards the central dolphin pool. It was a pity he hadn't stuck by that maxim when the monks had found him moments before. In hindsight, he should have used the Mauser to keep them at bay until he'd had a chance to explain, but he'd been too relieved at having normal human company again. That was Grace and McConnell's doing, he thought bitterly. In the old days he'd never have been so careless.

The Mauser now lay somewhere behind on that damn rock. He hadn't felt the need to pick it up when they'd arrived, drawn to investigate by screams and gunfire. Only when hoisted to his feet by rough hands did he realise something was amiss.

Explanations tumbled from his lips, but a swift blow to the face silenced further pleas. Pryce had been popular and he a stranger.

Sighisoara all over again.

Except this time he didn't deserve it! In Sighisoara he'd been a grave-robber and thief, the hatred justified. Here, he'd acted in self-defence! Were they not aware of the Mindless? Had they not seen how easily one could slip into barbarism?

Flaming torches lit their path, huge shadows cast amongst the trees. Monkeys, awoken by the commotion, began screeching in panic, and their voices were soon joined by the monks, as more and more were alerted to the congregation.

"Murder!" they cried, though soon the declaration of the act turned instead to broadcast of the accused. "Murderer! Murderer!"

The Mariner stumbled. Thinking he would hit the ground, he closed his eyes ready for impact, but found strange arms beneath his shoulders holding him aloft.

"Plenty of time to lay down later, you evil fuck!" snarled the man supporting him. The Mariner looked at him shocked, surprised to see someone who he'd only ever seen quietly meditating, now so animated with venom.

“Please,” he mumbled, but a woman leading the way turned and sucker-punched him, knocking all air from his lungs.

They emerged where he’d first been presented to Diane, and once again she was ready for him, though this time standing before her throne instead of reclining, ready to judge rather than rule.

“It is as I feared!” she declared. “What deed did this man do?”

The many responded. “He killed Pryce!”

“Shot him in cold blood!”

“Arthur, what happened?”

The Mariner turned and saw McConnell being held by two monks. Word must have spread quick.

“Mindless,” he managed to gasp. “Pryce turned Mindless.”

“Silence!” Diane bellowed, and the crowd complied. “Is this true? Is Brother Pryce dead?”

“It is. I saw his body myself,” the man holding the Mariner growled. “Shot and killed.”

She looked at the Mariner with cold reptilian eyes, and for a moment the Mariner was taken aback by what he saw. *You shouldn’t have mentioned my book*, they seemed to say with a petty jubilation.

“He came here to plot against us, to spread dissent,” she spoke with the smallest hint of a smirk. “He’s an agent of the demon, come to maintain the Déjà vu. I’ve suspected this for some time, as did Pryce.” She strolled along the bridge,

coming ever closer to the Mariner. All watched her with awe and reverence. "But Pryce came too close to discovering this fact and you killed him, didn't you? You thought you could contain your true identity, a secret sealed in blood! But you've been found out, demon-lover!"

You don't believe a word of this, the Mariner thought as he looked into her eyes. *But these poor bastards do, and that's enough.*

All around him the crowd began chanting again, though this time 'murderer' had been replaced with 'demon'.

Diane was almost upon him now, smiling in her victory. He hadn't realised how threatened she'd been by his small dissent on the beach, but now he knew. They'd read each other's cards quite clearly, though perhaps his far more than hers.

"This is madness!" McConnell's shrill voice rose above the din. Diane angrily turned her glare to him, hoping he'd be cowed into silence, but the only silence it brought was from the crowd. If Diane was to converse, then they should honour it. "I know you're angry," he said, "but it is not this man's fault! You're blaming him for a universal truth. Surely we've all witnessed it? Brother turning against brother, father against son, peaceful women violent as if by a change of the wind? Why would Arthur kill Pryce if not in self-defence? He was defending against a man turned Mindless, not acting on behalf of some mythical demon!"

"See?" Diane's eyes lit up in triumph. "The murderer's accomplice shows his true colours! He defends not only the murderer, but the demon itself! They are as guilty as each other."

“Are you going to take her word for all of this? Why put the group’s faith in just one? What’s wrong with you all?”

McConnell wailed as he was dragged to the Mariner’s side. His words might have struck a chord, if not for an immense sound echoing across the zoo, one of wood cracking against stone. It lasted only a few seconds and all eyes searched the surrounding structures, looking for the building that must have crumbled, for it sounded like wooden planks tumbling and splitting.

Finally the strange noise died away and was replaced by even greater monkey chatter.

Diane, eager to regain the focus of the crowd, clapped her hands. “Collect wood for a fire, justice must be done.”

“Justice? What justice is this? At least hold us until his story can be checked? Send a ship to Sighisoara, find the truth in his words! It happens, people turn Mindless, you don’t need to judge now!”

Diane shook her head. “I’m sorry, but it must be done right away. I have sensed a chance to challenge Déjà vu whilst the demon-servants burn. It’s what’s happened before. It’s what’ll happen again.”

The two men were forced to the ground, whilst a bonfire was hastily constructed. Somewhere behind, amongst the crowd they could hear Grace crying.

“For God’s sake, don’t let her see this!” McConnell begged. “She’s just a child!” But his pleas were ignored; all were duty-bound to bear witness to Diane’s justice.

It didn’t take long for the pyre to be laid out, large enough for two men spread across. Gasoline was splashed across, the monks careful to keep their torches a safe distance.

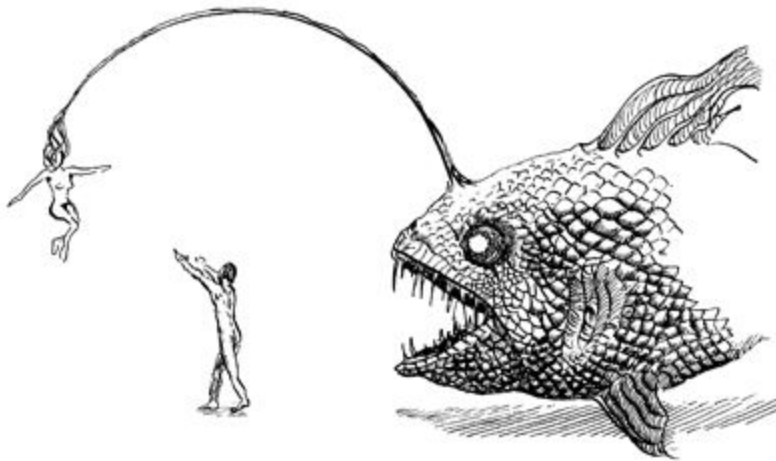
“Bind their hands!”

Whilst their arms were pulled behind their backs and ropes wrapped around their wrists, McConnell gave a last ditch attempt to convince the crowd.

“Don’t you understand? We’re not agents of a demon! Pryce turned Mindless!”

But Diane had grown impatient to their protests. “Burn the murderers!” she snarled, a faint laugh gracing her lips. “There’s no such thing as Mindless!”

And it was then that the Mindless attacked.



30
EXODUS

SCREAMS FROM THE OUTER FRINGES of the crowd brought a halt to the burning. Confused, the congregation remained still, hoping the chilling sound was the normal day-to-day business of challenging déjà vu. Only when strange figures launched themselves into the light, clawing and biting those closest, did panic truly spread.

An elderly monk stood aside whilst he allowed those younger than he to construct the pyre, suddenly found himself seized from behind. The creature sank teeth into his neck and plunged fingers deep into his eye sockets, swivelling them around as a child would probe their nose. He battered weakly at his attacker whilst a wet sticky goo ran down his cheeks.

Another, not far from the old man, saw a Mindless coming, but was so confused by the situation all she could do was ask, "Who are you?" before the creature smashed her head with a rock. Her body collapsed to the floor while it stood above her, repeatedly bringing its primitive weapon down upon her skull.

The man who'd been keeping a close hold of the Mariner bolted, following the lead of his associates. They fled in all directions, only to find that the Mindless were all about them. Rather than an organised attack, it was an infestation.

Diane, until moments before so full of fire and fury, now seemed lost and timid. "What's happening? Who are they?" Her eyes widened as she backed away from the Mariner and McConnell. "Did you summon them?"

"Of course we didn't, you stupid bitch!" McConnell snapped as his head weaved in panic between her and the oncoming fiends. "Untie us!"

But Diane was already gone, retreating back along the bridge to the small platform in the middle of the pool as if the ring of water would form a protective barrier.

"Come back! Those fucking dolphins won't help you!" McConnell gave a yell as he felt hands at his back. They turned out to be Grace pulling at the ropes. "Oh thank you God! Be quick girl, be quick!"

After pulling his binds loose, Grace moved to the Mariner, though the rope around him proved tighter. McConnell grabbed the thickest stick he could find from the pyre and stood protectively behind the girl.

“Faster! Faster!”

The Mariner watched helplessly as a Mindless looked up from a corpse, roving eyes suddenly fixing upon him with mad intensity. The fiend had once been a young man, probably no more than seventeen; now he were a beast, acting on a fury that consumed its all.

“Arthur,” whispered McConnell. “Are you armed?”

“No, I dropped my gun at the beach.”

“Fuck.”

And the creature began to charge.

“Pleasepleaseplease,” Grace was muttering under her breath as she moved to free the Mariner’s hands.

The Mindless was close now and McConnell strode out as if to bat a baseball. He tensed, a peaceful man trying to prepare for violence, nervous, toying. But as it came close he swung true, the stick connecting with the side of the Mindless’ head, twirling it around and dropping. There it howled, gripping its temple, trying to lift itself, yet failing to maintain any balance. It reminded the reverend of a dying fly, wings useless, yet still desperate to take flight.

“Got it!” Grace cried in triumph, the thick ropes falling to their captor’s knees. The Mariner, free from bondage, returned to his feet.

“Reverend, grab me one of those sticks, we need to get moving!” McConnell didn’t respond. “Reverend?”

“He’s just a boy,” he muttered, looking at the thrashing Mindless on the floor. “No more than a child.”

“McConnell, for fuck sake!” The Mariner ran past the stunned reverend and grabbed a weapon for himself. “We need to get out of here, now!”

“Where did they come from?” Grace asked though tears as she clutched McConnell’s waist. Her touch snapped him from his trance even though he had no answer to give.

All about them were scenes of chaos. Figures dashed to and fro in the flickering hell. Torches dropped, some extinguished whilst others creating isolated fires, eager to cooperate and grow strong.

“Grab one of those,” the Mariner commanded, pointing Grace towards a discarded torch, still burning brightly. “Lead the way, and if one gets close, aim for the face.”

Nervously, the three began to inch away from the pool, back the way the Mariner had been dragged. McConnell and the Mariner stood on either side of Grace, trying to look in every direction at once.

“Don’t leave me!”

The voice sounded shrill and young. It was Diane. She stood on her throne, surrounded by the circle of water and then an even greater circle of carnage, cutting a lonely silhouette. A Mindless heard her cry, its eyes immediately searching for she who made it. It focused upon her and, without a flinch, dropped into the pool, haphazardly swimming to reach her tiny island.

The Mariner felt he should say something, some final word of comfort or condemnation, but thought better. Best to use her as a distraction for their own escape. He put his hand to Grace's back, and shepherded her away.

As they passed between trees and lost sight of the clearing, Diane began to scream.

Their journey through the zoo was slow, yet that careful inching seemed to cloak them with near invisibility. Mindless pursued monks, each running as erratically as the other, injuring themselves in the pitch black night. Sometimes they would pass by, just yards from where they cowed behind their improvised weapons, only to run on without giving them a sideward glance. In so much confusion, the trio slipped quietly away.

The whole zoo was a cacophony of screams, roars and panicky monkey gibberish, impossible to know where one ended and the other began, just a continuous wail that rose up above the canopy. Up along the path they saw a woman running, not holding a flaming torch, but a small electrical one. It shone a tight cold beam backwards and forwards across the path before her and then up into the Mariner's face.

"Please, you have to help me!"

Squinting against the beam of light he saw the cook he'd worked alongside in the kitchens, except when he'd met her before she'd been a self-composed, plain young thing; now her face was haunted and drawn. "Megan?" he asked, surprised to find her amongst the chaos.

"A few of us went to retrieve Pryce's body when we heard wood splitting, like a whole bunch of tree's being felled. We

followed the sound and found it wasn't that at all, a ship's run aground!"

"A ship?" The Mariner grabbed Megan in alarm. "What did it look like? Was it the Neptune?"

"I don't know, I don't know," she wailed. "There's no light! But when we got close, all these evil, *evil* people started attacking us." Megan burst into tears and fell forward, wrapping her arms around the Mariner, awkwardly holding her in return. "I don't think anyone else survived. They killed them! Oh God they killed them!"

"Shush now." McConnell patted her on the shoulder. "We need to keep quiet, don't worry, you can come with us."

"She can?" the Mariner asked, alarmed at having another ward to care for.

"Of course," McConnell continued. "Don't worry my dear, we'll protect you."

"Thank you," she said wiping tears from her face and struggling to get her sobs under control. "But what can we do?"

"The Mindless were aboard that ship, which means my Neptune is still out there in one piece. We'll be safe there. But all of you have to *keep quiet*."

"Oh fuck!" Megan suddenly screamed, seemingly in defiance of his command, and pulled away. The Mariner turned, expecting, as did she, to see Mindless, yet light revealed the approaching figures of several monks, amongst them the man who'd roughly handled the Mariner to his harsh judgement.

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” the man said, holding out his hands to placate her. “It’s just us.”

“Well get going,” the Mariner snarled. “We don’t want you.”

“I’m sorry, don’t you understand? I’m sorry!”

The man’s protests seemed utterly preposterous. What was he trying to achieve? Surely he could see it was every man for himself? And then the Mariner finally realised: they thought the Mariner didn’t want them out of spite, a blunt form or revenge, rather than simple truth of survival.

“Listen, I’ve already got three to care for here!”

The man’s terrified eyes pleaded for clemency. “Strength in numbers!”

“When has that ever been true?”

“We’ve got nowhere else to go!”

“Fine. Just keep quiet, will you?”

And so the three turned four, turned seven, and they continued their slow creep. Behind them, the sounds of violence dissipated, not from distance, but from the confrontations growing less frequent. The monks were dying.

“How much further?” McConnell hissed. “I don’t remember the beach being this far away.”

“I recognise that cage,” said Grace, pointing at a small rusted enclosure up ahead. “It’s not far. How are we going to all fit in the row-boat?”

“They can bloody swim if they have to,” the Mariner said, resenting their new accomplices.

The rough-handed man suddenly started shaking the Mariner's arm. "Behind, there's someone behind!"

The small group paused, packed together like penguins, each trying to be as still as a statue whilst they listened to a shuffling creature stumble and snort its way up the path. It was making slow progress, seemingly idle in its journey, yet cloaked in darkness whilst they were lit up.

"Oh God! Oh God!" Megan prayed in a tiny voice. Hands clenched their neighbours as they waited for the inevitable.

The figure slowly stepped into the light. It was a Mindless, her teeth and jaw bloodied from combat. Whomever she had attacked, they had fought back; her face was scratched and left ear torn and hanging by a small shred of skin. Yet the aggressor had been the victor, that could be seen from the globules of flesh smeared across her lips and cheek like war paint.

The Mindless screeched, hands stretched talon-like. Behind, in the darkness for the zoo, countless other Mindless voices joined the call, all sprinting to where they'd heard fresh prey could be found.

The seven survivors ran.

"Get to the beach!" the Mariner screamed, grabbing Grace by her back and lifting the child from the ground. McConnell did his best to help Megan whilst they sprinted in the dark, lit only by the flame Grace held aloft and Megan's small electric torch.

The strong-handed man, who'd never be able to introduce himself as Clement, made a dash for the rusted cage, throwing himself inside and shutting the door behind. With a gritty crunch, it latched shut and he fell back into the

confines, trembling, rubbing his hands over his face to blot out the madness.

The rest ran by, pursued by the Mindless, and with them they took the light. He crouched, whimpering and afraid, and wondered, just what had he done to deserve this fate?

Moments later, he heard the sound of other Mindless, sprinting through the undergrowth, following the sounds of the chase. How many were there? In the dark it sounded like an army, an endless procession of evil.

Eventually they passed and the trees grew quiet.

Clement waited, curled up for what seemed like hours, though it could only have been minutes, for faintly he heard gunfire from the coast.

It didn't last long.

Was he the only survivor? Probably, the others he'd been with would undoubtedly have been killed by now. Still, all he had to do was wait for first light and then sneak to the shore. There he might be able to swim to that strange captain's ship and escape. But where to? He had no idea, he knew of no other lands but this, at least in the world he lived in now, but at least he was alive. Alive was good. Alive was enough.

He waited throughout the night, trying to stifle his screams when an insect scuttled across a hand, trying to keep his panic under control when a monkey snapped a branch in the canopy. Thoughts of the evening's horrors were kept at bay with careful planning of the journey he'd take.

However improbable, Clement slept, perhaps from exhaustion, perhaps as a way of protecting his mind from breaking. When he finally opened his eyes, a moment of

doubt caused his heart to leap. Had he died? Was this the foggy wastes of the afterlife? As the beats slowed to a bearable rate, he saw it was not true. The darkness had given way to a dreary misty morning, a thick sea-fog blanketing the island in its soft embrace. Light was dull, but enough to see the way. It was time.

Joints screaming and head pounding, Clement silently got to his feet. He'd played the journey in his head many times; he knew the zoo well and had picked out several hiding spots encase things got dangerous. If any of these creatures, these zombies – yes, he thought, *that's what they must be! Zombies!* – saw him, he would dash to the north, making as much sound as possible and then silently double back. The fog gave cover and these were stupid creatures, they could be deceived.

He placed his hands on the bars, and slowly slid them open. Metal upon rust gave a low gritty screech, quiet, yet appearing impossibly loud against the silent forest. Were the monkeys dead, or just lying low? In the distance he could make out the sounds of the waves lapping at the shore. When was the last time he'd managed to hear that this far inland?

Clement stepped out of his protective cage and surveyed the immediate surroundings. The fog gave him about ten feet of visibility, and in those he could tell all was clear. The forest floor was littered with dry leaves, but he found that if he shuffled forward he could nudge them rather than crack their brittle forms. After a few tries he started to time his movements with those of the distant waves, masking the sound of his steps.

Were any of the others alive? That strange sailor looked like he could handle himself, but the priest and the girl? Could

he protect them as well? Perhaps they were gathered on the coast waiting for him?

Clement sped up his movements, eager to reach his destination, seizing upon the hope that whatever fire-fight had occurred, it were the humans who'd prevailed.

A cold chill from the morning stroked his neck. He turned, staring into the misty shadows that swirled behind, closing in his wake. Were there zombies in those mists? He strained his eyes, trying to see if the grey trails of movement had been caused by him, but the longer he spent watching one dimly lit corner, the more concerned he'd become about another.

He broke into a jog, and then a run. Gone was his nerve. Gone was the carefully laid plan. It wasn't far now, soon he'd be at the beach with the others. There he'd be safe! There he wouldn't have to look in every direction at once! There he wouldn't have to feel imagined fingers clawing the nape of his neck!

And indeed, it was true. He'd reached the beach and was stepping over corpses of the Mindless, their bodies pierced by bullets, and by the shore he could see the party that had waited for him, standing patiently looking out to sea. Eight figures of stoic patience, eight beacons of hope.

"I'm here! I'm here!" he cried, allowing a relieved laugh to fall from his throat.

But as one of the figures turned to look at him, eyes mad and lips torn and bloody, he realised the figures in the mist were not friendly at all.

They had, however, been waiting.

The Mariner tried to shout a warning to the strong-handed man as he locked himself away, but there was no time. Behind them, the Mindless woman chased, stumbling and howling, yet it was not her he was concerned about, it was the countless other Mindless shrieks. The whole pack was bearing down on the last few survivors that dared to evade their punishments.

To his surprise, the two monks who'd joined them, an elderly woman and a portly middle-aged man were managing to keep up. Fear and a good diet giving reserves the Mariner would never have expected to look for, though both their faces were flushed with the effort.

Still, there wasn't much looking to be done. Their journey was a desperate scurry, through foliage that tore and bit, yet what it dished out to them it also delivered in heaps to the Mindless behind. Trees were non-discriminatory, and the Mindless had little control over their flailing limbs.

Finally they broke cover onto the beach, sand bringing relief, yet infuriating sluggishness to their tread.

"The row-boat! McConnell, get the boat ready!" The Mariner ran on, past the small vessel that the others were trying to drag towards the seashore, his legs slipping in the wet sand, making his progress seem dream-like in its glacial tempo.

He neared the rock, and leapt onto its surface, glad to be free from the sand, yet frustrated by the darkness that surrounded him. Hands splayed wide, he found himself once again clawing about the same stretch of stone, searching for his missing Mauser. A finger brushed against something, but it turned out to be the cold leg of Pryce, initially ignored in favour of a lynching, and now to be ignored forever.

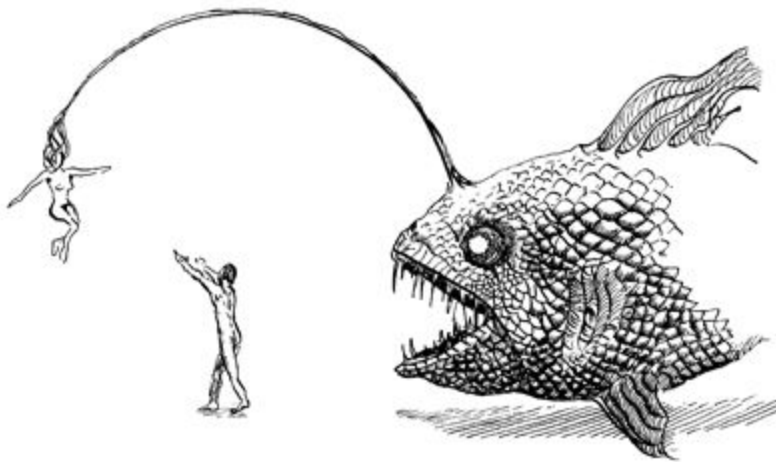
Behind him, he heard Grace and the old lady start to scream.

Never enough time!

Cold metal filled his hand. He was up, throwing himself back towards the beach, not caring if he injured himself in the process, just desperate to put this island behind him.

Ahead he could see the row-boat; it was in the surf, taking in water, whilst the others frantically tried to pull a Mindless woman off the portly monk. Megan still held her torch, a beam which wove frantically back and forth, trying to take in as much as possible from the gloom. Instead of bringing her flaming stick, Grace had left it, speared in the sand at the head of the beach. Now it illuminated the ten, maybe more, Mindless, who'd caught up and broke cover, streaking towards their hated enemy.

Muttering a prayer to whatever force might look out for him, the Mariner began to fire.



DESPITE THE CONTINUOUS ROCKING, THE Neptune felt more like firm ground than land ever did, and despite the circumstances, the pain, and the additional intruders, the Mariner was glad to be once more upon her ample frame.

Initial joy had been tempered somewhere however, as crew of one had been transformed to six.

Six.

Six mouths to feed, not to mention the devils.

But at least *they* were pleased with the turn of events. As the refugees, soaking wet, wounded and bedraggled, climbed aboard, the beasts had hissed and growled. Their fearsome display had only lasted until they saw Grace, upon which they reverted to excited yapping, making them about as fearsome as a kitten in a bib. This was the final straw for the Mariner, who made a mental note of their uselessness.

And what a grim journey it had been. How many Mindless had he shot? The gun had been emptied and yet still they came, wading and swimming once the refugees had gotten beyond the surf. Hopefully they drowned, or were too stupid to turn back and were now paddling around the ocean, lost and growing tired.

Traumatized and exhausted, all he wanted, all *any of them* wanted, was to collapse, sleep, and allow the wind to carry them away. But sleep was beyond them, because the portly monk was wounded.

“Dead! I’m dead!” he screamed from below deck. McConnell and Megan were doing their best to address the wounds

upon his neck and shoulder, amateurish though their administrations were.

"You're not dead," she scolded. "These will heal, you'll see. You're going to be right as rain!"

"But they were zombies!" he insisted. "The undead! Flesh-Eaters! I'll become one for sure! You should throw me overboard now, lest I start feasting upon your brrrains!" He rolled the 'r' on his tongue theatrically, simultaneously emphasising the word and discrediting himself as an authority.

"Yeah do it." Mariner held his head, desperate for a drink and frustrated by the turn of events. "Before he, you know, feasts or whatever..."

"You would be wise to, sir! Heed my words!"

"We're not throwing you overboard, just sit tight." McConnell removed a deeply soiled cloth from the wound, threw it to the ground and began to apply another. "Zombies don't exist."

"What would you call those creatures that attacked us then?"

"Agents of the Demon, Cedrick," Megan said. "They were sent to stop us achieving Diane's goal." At mentioning Diane's name, the young woman bowed her head to stifle a sob.

"Nooo!" Cedrick muttered, shaking his head. "Zombies I tell you! Zombies!"

"I've heard enough," said the Mariner, heading above deck. "If he starts biting people, throw him over the side."

Annoyingly, the sound of Cedrick's protests still intruded into the world above, but at least they were dimmed, and the Mariner savoured his moments peace, turning his face towards the breeze and closing his eyes.

Where now? The only clue he'd felt they'd had was the zoo, and that had turned out to be a trap, just as the Oracle and Tetrazzini's rehab clinic had. So where next?

"We should head back to Sighisoara," McConnell said as if reading his mind. "Cedrick could do with getting that wound looked at, we're all exhausted, there's no food, and Mary and Megan are completely traumatised."

"Mary?"

"Yeah, the old lady. She's a lot calmer than the other two, but still, those monks were her family, and she's lost them all in a matter of minutes. At the moment she's concerned with caring for Megan and Grace, but once that distraction fades..." At a loss, McConnell shrugged.

"We can't go back to Sighisoara."

"Because you killed Tetrazzini?"

"No! Because we're not meant to!" The Mariner glared at McConnell, who defiantly returned the challenge. "I don't recall you complaining when you joined us!"

"I joined because I wasn't going to allow a young girl to go sailing with a self-confessed monster!"

The truth hurt. Yet it felt more comfortable to hear than McConnell's idealistic blather about Jesus Haych Christ. Hate was easier to process than hope.

“Do you think they’d let me live if I went back?”

“If I put in a word for you, sure.”

The Mariner’s stern expression burst as he laughed, placing a hand upon McConnell’s shoulder. Bemused, the reverend’s anger easily faded.

“And that was so effective with Diane! No, no. Your days of vouching for me are over.”

“Arthur,” McConnell said softly, still pressing his agenda. “Grace can’t live like this, she needs a stable environment. Visiting a zoo she used to be fond of is one thing, but.. just what are we doing now?”

And his doubt was valid. The Mariner was uncertain, and there was nothing he could do to hide that fact. With no answers to offer, he turned again to the sea, closing his eyes and embracing the internal dark. The Mariner enjoyed the void. No more voices, no more confrontations, no more pestering, just a blank slate and the sounds of the waves gently breaking against the hull.

“Help!”

Nothing but the waves, damnit!

“Please! Help!”

Shit.

“I think there’s someone down there!”

When the Mariner opened his eyes he saw McConnell running up and down the deck, looking into the water like a terrier that had spotted a rat.

“Arthur, there’s a man in the water!”

“Probably a Mindless.” He warily drew his gun and followed McConnell’s frantic pointing. “Or a trick,” he added remembering the eels.

“Please help!”

And indeed there was a man, frantically splashing and spluttering as he rose and fell with the waves.

“Hold on,” McConnell yelled. “We’ll get you out!”

“Didn’t you hear me?” the Mariner snapped. “It’s probably a trick. We should go below deck and wait until it’s gone.”

The look he got in return once again reminded the Mariner just how far apart the two men’s ethical systems were. McConnell was a compassionate man, someone whose instinct was always towards the benefit of others. What did that make him? “That’s a man down there, not an ‘it’! Help me haul him up.”

McConnell grabbed one of many ropes strewn about the deck and threw it into the water. After much tugging and splashing, the man finally managed to grasp it.

“Hold on tight, we’ve got you!” McConnell shouted, as the two men strained to lift the stranded survivor out the ocean below.

McConnell’s shouting had roused the others to witness the commotion.

“What’s going on?” Grace was the first to ask.

“Oh, just another guest. The more the merrier!” The Mariner’s shrill sarcasm was lost on the passengers (though he’d prefer the description ‘intruders’) as they ran as one to peer down.

“If you’re going to watch, you can join in!” McConnell said, appealing through gritted teeth. Grace, for all the help her small arms could offer, immediately seized a section of rope and began grunting with the exertion, more as a theatrical display of solidarity than proper assistance.

“I wish I could dear boy,” Cedrick apologised, keeping his eyes cast down to the soaked sailor being drawn up. “Sadly my zombie bite prohibits physical exertion. Still, he’s almost upon us, heave ho!”

And finally the three pulled the sailor the final few feet and he plopped wetly upon the deck, gasping for breath.

“Thankyou... thankyou... thankyou,” he muttered over and over between clogged gasps.

“I’ll get him some water,” McConnell said, heading for their meagre supplies.

Always careful, the Mariner pointed his Mauser at the soaked fellow. The young man was in his late-twenties and dressed in a drenched black suit, not much of a threat, but the Mariner was determined not to be made a fool of. “Who are you and where did you come from? Answer quickly or I’ll toss you back in. Make a move towards any one of us and I’ll shoot.”

“Arthur!” Grace gasped at his ruthless warning, but he continued regardless, ignoring the girl’s pleas.

“Water,” the man rasped. “Please, water!”

“You think I’m going to share my water with a passenger I can easily dispose of? I barely want to share it with this lot, let alone someone who could be a Mindless. *Or an eel.*” The Mariner could feel the others pondering the insanity of his words. “Just get talking!”

“Please! Please don’t put me back!”

“How long were you down there?”

“Since yesterday,” he gasped.

“How?” the Mariner demanded.

“My ship, it got taken over. I managed to jump overboard before they could get me. I drifted all night trying to stay afloat. I thought I would drown! Lost at sea all night, total blackness since-”

“Yeah yeah yeah!” the Mariner urgently interrupted. Who remembered the stars and who didn’t? Who would face the same fate as Pryce at their mention? “Who took over your ship? Pirates?”

The man licked his lips and looked between them. “Please, may I have some water? I’m parched.”

McConnell pushed through the others and held out a small plastic bottle. The man drank deep.

“Thank you,” he said, sounding a little stronger. “My name’s Harris, you won’t regret saving me, I promise. You’ll be rewarded.”

“Rewarded?” The Mariner gave an incredulous snort. “You just lost your ship. Your crew are gone, dead most likely. Who’ll reward us?”

“Get me back to the Beagle, and you’ll be paid for your time. Food, water, weapons, whatever you need!”

“The Beagle?”

“A doggy?” Grace’s eyes lit up.

Harris smiled apologetically at the girl. “The Beagle is a ship, named after the HMS Beagle that once carried a great scientist around the world.”

“Not a dog?”

“I’m afraid not, no.”

The Mariner was not impressed. “This ‘Beagle’, it is not your ship?”

“I fear my trusty Kraken is lost to me. No, the Beagle belongs to the head inquisitor, whom I serve.”

“You expect us to believe that?”

“Why would I lie?”

“Perhaps you’re a pirate. You’re going to lure us to some rock you call a ‘hideout’ where you and your bandit friends will kill us and take my ship?”

Harris nodded and grinned. “I suppose that’s a possibility, yeah. But you can be as paranoid as you like. If it looks like a trap, turn the other way. I won’t blame you! Maybe if we’d been a bit more paranoid, my crew wouldn’t have become...” he trailed off, a fearful look in his eyes. “Anomenemies!”

“Ano-whossits?” Cedrick asked with his usual exaggerations.

“Anomenemies! Zombies!”

“Zombies!” Cedrick clasped his wound with one hand and used the other to steady his swaying frame. “I knew it! Flesh Eaters! Cannibals, returned from the dead! There is no more room in hell!”

“Why do you call them ‘Anomenemies’?” the Mariner asked, refusing to be drawn into Cedrick’s display.

“That’s what they’re called, all of them. I didn’t realise men could become Anomenemies so easily. I must get back to the Beagle and make a full report.”

“To this head inquisitor?”

“Yes.”

“And who is that?”

“Mavis.”

The small audience stood in silence, waiting for further explanation.

“Mavis?”

“That’s right.”

“Let me get this straight,” the Mariner spoke slowly, piecing Harris’ story together. “Your ship wasn’t attacked, your crew turned Mindless, or in your terms they became ‘Anomenemies’?”

“Yes, almost the whole crew. Those that didn’t were killed. I threw myself overboard as soon as I saw it was hopeless.”

“And I’m guessing these Anomenemies wouldn’t be able to sail a ship? It would drift until it hit something - like an island?”

"I guess so..." Harris hesitated. "Why do you ask?"

"Your Mindless friends almost got us all killed, that's why!"

"I.. er.." Harris stammered. "You met them?"

"Yeah, we met them." The Mariner sighed, holstered the Mauser and rubbed his forehead as if pained. "This Beagle of yours, I suppose it's widely travelled?"

"Of course."

The island, thought the Mariner. *Perhaps they'll know it?*

"Very well," he said, his mind made up. "We'll return you to your Beagle, if you can point us in the right direction?"

"It's tricky. We have to navigate using the sun now instead of the st-"

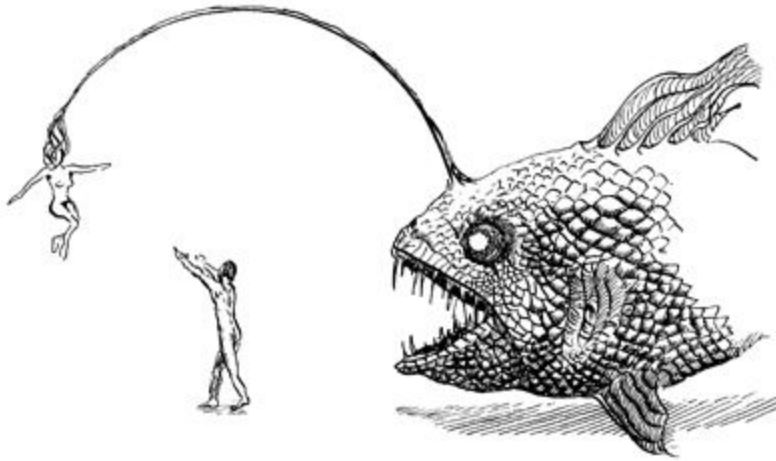
"Yes, yes!" he shouted, once again silencing Harris before it was too late. *I must put a stop to such talk,* he thought. *No mentioning what's no longer there. No acknowledgement.* "But can you get us there?"

"Probably."

"Good, you help me. The rest of you, get below deck and rest. And no chatting! Talk is dangerous, it almost killed me on the zoo. No chit-chat."

"Loose lips sink ships!" McConnell grinned.

The Mariner gave him a quizzical look, as ever not understanding the joke. "Indeed."



32

DARWIN'S DISCOVERY

THE NAME 'BEAGLE' CONJURED THE image of a lean, streamlined vessel. Something plucky and resilient, tough and scrappy. This noble visage could not have been further from the truth.

"That's her?" the Mariner asked, incredulous at the impractical Goliath before them. Harris failed to sense his disappointment, instead looking at the lumbering sow with something close to wonder.

The size of the Beagle was enormous, able to eat the Neptune whole and with enough space to chase it back with a lake or two. Indeed, the ship appeared hungry in its very construction; a huge mouth was built into its hull, wide-jawed and jowly. Whilst the sight of the Beagle disappointed the Mariner, Megan was positively excited.

"A ferry!" She hopped on her feet like a child. "I haven't seen one since I was thirteen. My mum took me to the Isle of Wight to see my uncle. Would've been one just like this."

“A ferry?”

“Yeah, cars go in that bit.” She pointed to the Beagle’s mouth. “And then they go out the other side.”

He didn’t quite understand what she meant, was it a mouth or not? “So that’s not a weapon?” With a condescending look she shook her head. No, it was not.

The journey to the Beagle had only taken a few days, and they spotted it on the horizon long before they neared. The ferry straddled the ocean like a beetle on dung, a small island in its own right, but the sheer size of it suggested inherent difficulties.

“How do you dock?”

Harris tilted his head, non-committed. “We’ve never really had to. The scout ships bring back supplies, the Beagle acts as a base of operations, a place to conduct research, tests and trials.”

“Trials?”

“Of the Anomenemies.”

“You put zombies on trial?” Cedrick’s eyes opened in alarm and clutched at his wound, healed despite his certainty that it would infect and prove fatal.

“If we’re lucky, you might get to see one.”

As they neared, two small ships, a more common size (unlike the hefty Neptune and gargantuan Beagle), bounced across the waves. Their motors roared defensively as they put a barrier between the strangers and their mother Beagle. Loud megaphones dictated how the greetings were to play out:

the Neptune would await a small collection of scouts who would board and inspect the crew and cargo, before bringing them to the Beagle for interviews.

Harris nodded encouragingly. All standard procedure, though the Mariner was less than impressed, anxious about the incursion.

“Your friends seemed to have brought guns,” he growled at Harris, before turning to the rest of his passengers milling on-deck. “I want you all to hide until this is straightened out. This could get unpleasant.”

“Woah! Woah there!” Harris stepped in front of the Mariner, waving his hands. “It’s how we always treat the unauthorised. As soon as they see me aboard, we’ll be allowed to approach, no problem. Just... chill out!”

Remaining stoic against Harris’ platitudes, he kept a hand on his holstered Mauser.

“And don’t touch that thing, or we might all get killed!”

Five men wearing different attire, though acting as a well-trained unit, climbed up the rope ladder and gathered on deck, each one pointing a handgun at the motley crew.

“Identify yourselves immediately,” said one appearing to be in charge.

“Barnett, it’s me!” Harris nodded enthusiastically. “You can stand down.”

“Captain Harris?” Barnett was shocked, but didn’t lower his weapon, instead he glowered at the Neptune’s crew. “But this isn’t the Kraken. Who are these people? What happened to your command?”

“We were overcome by Anomenemies. I was forced to abandon the Kraken and commandeer this vessel instead. This is Captain Arthur Philip of the Neptune, and these are his people. They seek our protection.”

“What’s that?!” Barnett suddenly swooped his gun low to point at the ground. His lackeys did likewise, some dropping to their knees to facilitate their aim.

“It’s an Anomenemy, sir!”

“Permission to shoot?”

“No it’s not!” Grace yelled. “His name’s Percy!” With a defiance she stepped in front of the tazy devil, who, like a deer caught in headlights, halted under the glare of attention and nervously farted.

“What manner of creature is it?”

“It’s a Tasmanian Devil you idiot.” McConnell shook his head, irritated.

Barnett swung his attention from beast to reverend, a scowl across his wide thuggish brow. “We have to be careful out here. We are fighting for the very future of the human race. If an Anomenemy made it past our defences, all could be lost. We’re trying to save the fucking world.”

“It’s true, I promise,” said Harris. “Wait until you meet Mavis, then you’ll understand.”

Barnett studied each of the passengers, running every suspect through some internal test, the parameters known only to him.

“How long have you known these people, captain?”

“Just a couple of days, but they’re fine. I can vouch for them.”

“Very well, drop anchor here, you will not be permitted to approach the fleet any further. We shall take you to the Beagle via the speedboat. No weapons. No dogs. Understand?”

All agreed, some more reluctantly than others. McConnell and the Mariner proved the most suspicious, though raging hunger drove them to submission.

“Very well,” the Mariner relented, starving and powerless to refuse.

Their approach to the Beagle was one of shadow and awe. The mighty ship loomed above, blotting out all sunlight, and suddenly the sea spray took a chill quality. There was no direct access to the Beagle from the sea surface, instead the crew of the Neptune were forced to board a satellite ship, a converted fishing trawler, and then cross onto the Beagle via a temporary gangway, watched the whole time by suspicious gun barrels and makeshift pikes.

“Not quite the welcome you lead us to believe,” the Mariner spoke with a tone brimming with threat.

“It’s all just show, don’t worry,” Harris once again tried to placate his guests “It’s all routine. If it makes them feel safer, why not? No-one’s going to get harmed.”

The immediate striking difference between the Neptune and the Beagle, was that the ferry was metal throughout. Every footfall upon her echoed back to their ears and it felt to the Mariner as if he’d been shrunk to the size of a bullet, rattling around in the barrel of a gun. Grimy white walls felt stark

and impersonal, further emphasised as they entered her gut, an area behind the mouth he'd been so alarmed by. The cavernous chamber was crammed with goods and supplies, a horde teeming with a crew, each man and woman sorting and cataloguing.

"The rewards of hunting Anomenemies," Harris said, indicating the plenty. "Sometimes traders give us a cut for the protection we provide, other times they are simply the spoils of war."

The Mariner was gob-smacked. "Is all this food?"

"No, not all. See those bags over there? Coal. We got some barrels of petrol as well somewhere. Guns are what we're after most, but there's never enough of those. Our teams usually have to share, think World-War-Russia and you got the right idea."

Despite the activity, the cargo room was dimly lit, lights some thirty feet in the air emitting a low orange glow, bestowing little but shadows on the workers below. The crew had supplemented the luminosity with their own oil lamps and battery powered torches that created little pools of light amongst the crates.

"Whilst some supplies are plentiful, fuel for the Beagle is low," Harris explained. "In fact the ship hasn't moved for some months now, engine on emergency power only."

"You didn't mention anything about this before," the Mariner said. "I thought she was well travelled?"

"We are!" Harris' defences shot up, a brief flash of anger at being doubted crossing his features. "Just because the Beagle doesn't sail any-more doesn't mean that her eyes don't roam. My Kraken has seen many sights, I can assure

you.” He strode ahead, pulling open a heavysset door that led into a tight corridor. “Follow.”

As they were marched ever more centrally, they passed further members of the Beagle’s crew, and unlike when they’d arrived at the zoo, these were uninterested in visitors, concerned only with their own tasks. Countless blank faces bathed in a dim light.

“It’s like being back in a city,” McConnell said, his voice carefully quiet yet still echoing. “It’s been a long time since I’ve felt a part of a multitude. Strangely comforting in its way.”

The Mariner received no similar comfort. He couldn’t help but feel that they were once more captives; Harris another Pryce leading him to Mavis. most likely a tin-pot dictator like Diane, another fraud and monster.

At least this monster might have some spare wine.

“Stay here,” a gruff escort commanded, pointing his gun at the Neptune’s crew. While they obediently waited, Harris was shepherded through a set of doors, still no warmer in construction than the metallic ones they’d touched before.

The Mariner turned to speak with McConnell, keeping his voice no more than a whisper.

“What do you think of our chances of seeing him again?”

“You’ve got to trust someone.”

“What evidence do you have for this?”

“If they were going to kill us, they’d have done so by now.”

The Mariner raised his eyebrows. "You've lived a sheltered life, reverend. People are far sicker than you'd believe."

Finally the door opened and a guard beckoned them through.

The room beyond was as dimly lit as the rest of the ship, though the multitude of desks inside were scattered with lamps, their shades directing beams onto notebooks, papers, beakers and microscopes. It gave the impression of a thin strip of light, horizontally arranged with darkness above and below. Between them he could see a waistline moving back and forth in a shuffle.

"Come in, come in," he heard an ancient voice whisper. Each of them stepped through, the guards departing and closing the door behind.

As the Mariner's eyes adjusted to the differences in light, a wizened face swam from the gloom. Mavis was small, no more than a sack of bones with a smiley face slapped on top. The light bounced off her pearly dentures, and with the skin so tight about her skull, she gave the impression of a skeleton rising from the dark. He didn't flinch though; her eyes were warm and welcoming. If she were a skeleton she was a noble one.

"Ma'am, it is my duty to introduce to you-"

"Enough Harris," she silenced him with a wave of a stick-thin arm. "Let them speak for themselves, I won't abide by all that pomposity here." She reached the Mariner and took his hand, staring up at his face. Close up he found she had a vaguely medicinal smell and the thinness of her hair only added to the feeling he conversed with a corpse. "I hope he hasn't been like that since he found you?" she giggled, though the sound was dry as a bag of chalk. "I keep telling

him to relax, but whenever he's in here it's all ma'am this and official report that. Stomping about as if he were in the army! Still, I'm grateful, he's a good boy." Harris didn't respond, but his stature swelled with pride at her praise. "Where did he find you?"

"Actually," the Mariner said, looking into her warm eyes. "We found him."

Harris coughed nervously. "I regret to inform you we have lost the Kraken, along with the Anomenemy we retrieved from 'Island 227'. I was forced to abandon ship when my crew succumbed to a madness."

"You lost the whole crew?" The voice from the back of the room took the Mariner by surprise. He hadn't thought there were any others but Mavis and Harris, but now he noticed a third reclining in a corner. She was smartly presented, as Harris would have been were it not for his night in the ocean, a soaking permanently altering his suit for the worse. She was young, long blond hair swept back behind her ears, jaw firmly set and eyes cool and unblinking. "How could you lose the ship, lose the crew and yet survive yourself?"

Harris was clearly irritated by the woman's question. "I don't know how it happened. One minute everyone was fine, the next: total madness. Terrible, violent madness. I believe it to be a form of zombification."

"Then it's spreading," Mavis sighed. "We need to do better. Did your crew have much contact with the Anomenemy you captured, Harris?"

"As a matter of fact, ma'am, some did. She was quite talkative, kept entertaining the crew with stories of their past. Silly unsubstantiated stuff, though they seemed quite taken by it."

“Then it is as I feared: contagion. We are not eradicating this disease fast enough, it’s spreading and if we’re careless it will consume us all.”

Mavis seemed weak with the effort of speaking, her voice fragile and tired, and her hand still holding onto the Mariner’s as if afraid to fall. It struck him that this woman chosen as leader was utterly unsuited to the task. Surely a rival would simply have to give a light push to perform a coup d’état? How could someone so vulnerable maintain control over so vast a clan?

“So the Kraken is lost,” the woman in the shadows continued, unwilling to let the matter slide. “And yet, you’re alive Harris? Did you feel that going down with the ship was beyond you?”

Harris’ face was sour. “I think you’ll find that the ship hasn’t sunk, it has merely run aground!”

The Mariner sensed a rivalry between the pair, and moved quickly to diffuse any feud. “The Kraken drifted into an island we were inhabiting. I can confirm the crew had become Mindless.”

“Mindless?”

“Yes, er.. Zombies.”

Mavis patiently nodded. “You mean ‘Anomenemies’?”

“I do not know the meaning of the word.”

Mavis grinned at the Mariner’s caution. “Who are you, young man? And speak clearly, my ears are not what they were. They deteriorate day by day. I used to dread the idea of

reliance upon a hearing-aid, but now I would gladly kill for one.”

The Mariner spoke slowly. “My name is Arthur Philip, Captain of the Neptune. We were forced to flee the island we were living upon when it became inhabited by these Anomenemies. A short time later we found Harris in the water and brought him here.”

“Looking for a reward, no doubt?”

“Food, drink, a bit of information.”

“Of course. Harris, take his crew to the dining quarters and see that they are well fed. Captain Philip will stay here and talk with me.”

“Certainly, Ma’am.” Harris bowed and escorted the crew away. If any were keen to stay and hear the conversation, their hunger overruled the desire. Grace showed some reluctance, but a nod from the Mariner and a gentle nudge from McConnell coaxed her along.

“Is there anything you need in the immediate?” Mavis asked as they departed.

“A drink wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Water?”

“Whiskey.”

She chuckled again, dropping his hand and moving away, making a yard look like a mile. “Of course. Heidi, do me a favour and get us a couple of drinks, will you?”

Harris' rival reluctantly left to retrieve the spirit, leaving the two alone.

"Have you ever heard of Richard Darwins?"

The Mariner admitted that no, he had not.

"He was a scientist. Perhaps the greatest that ever lived, one whom the likes of myself can only aspire to emulate. He was a pioneer of atheism, the rejection of the supernatural, illogical, unquestioning fallacies of the masses. But he was more than that, he influenced the whole course of civilisation when he discovered a process called evolution. This discovery was found on a voyage, similar to the one we are on, on a ship after which this one was named. And it is through his discovery that we will undo the damage wrought upon us.

"You see, the world used to make sense. Throughout mankind's history, we have been shrouded in mysticism and ignorance, but finally, through rational thought and perseverance, science managed to conquer. By the beginning of the twenty-first century our world was held together by a set of rules, discovered and confirmed by scientists. For the first time in our history, we truly understood how things *worked*. I'm sure you remember."

The Mariner kept quiet, not wanting to explain that he remembered nothing of the old world. Well, *almost* nothing.

"But then things changed. The centre did not hold, everything fell apart. The cause? I don't know, no-one does, but nonetheless we find ourselves in a world no longer made of rules, but dominated by questions." She leaned forward, stressing the subsequent point. "And inhabited by things that simply *shouldn't* exist."

The Mariner nodded, this much was true, it was what he'd heard time and time again from those who claimed to compare the two eras.

"These things do not obey our world's history. They do not fit in with the *rules* we discovered. They are anomalies, and they are our enemies too. The presence of such creatures further weakens and undermines the rules we need in order to restore our lives. Every last one must be hunted down and eradicated."

"Are these the trials I've heard about?"

Mavis turned and retreated to the back of the room. "Come, I have something to show you."

She led him through a door, proving the room they were in was merely an antechamber to one much larger. Unlike the previous one, this was bathed in an even blue light that seemed determined to eradicate even the smallest shadow. There was little in the way of furniture, just a single chair and a gurney. A figure was strapped into each. Both were dead.

"This man was accused of being an Anomenemy," Mavis said, standing beside the corpse in the gurney. It was that of an adult male, middle-aged, his head balding and flabby round the waist. The old lady ran her fingers across his skin, pale in death but stained with dark bruises, most located around the arms, still strapped tight. "Anomenemies come in many forms, captain. Some are clearly monsters, other are like you and I. Those that mask themselves thus must be tested. With science."

"And the other?" he asked, gesturing towards the body in the chair, another man, some years younger than the first.

Mavis didn't answer, but chose to continue her train of thought. "Richard Darwins discovered the history of our species: that life *evolves*. We came from the monkeys who came from rats who came from fish. Every animal is related to the other, slight changes with every child born separating one strain from the last. Different species united in the annals of time. United in the *blood*, captain. In the *blood*."

"How can you tell if a creature is not of our world? If it does not obey the laws of science? Why, you look in its blood of course, to see if evolution can be found there."

Mavis nodded towards the corpse in the chair, disappointment crossing her face like a teacher referring to a particularly stupid pupil. "A pirate, a thief and a murderer. No-one to feel pity for, but useful for our test, because as loathsome as he was, he was *one of us*. He was a being born of evolution, his blood the same family as mine and of yours, just like every other creature from the old-world. All branches from the same tree."

"Anomenemies are not of our family. They do not obey the rules. They have *different blood* and when it is mixed with ours the effects are... lethal. That's what we did here. A simple transfusion from the subject to the pirate. If the pirate dies we know we have an Anomenemy, and deal with it accordingly."

"You kill them?"

"You think we killed an innocent man? No, there were countless reports he was a practising witch. All such evils must be put to death. For science."

She patted the dead 'Anomenemy' tenderly and the Mariner shivered. Despite her frailty he was starting to understand the danger of the old woman, the ease she surrounded

herself in the macabre. How easy was it to end up on her gurney, the blood from your arm flowing into that of an equally doomed captive?

“How do you know evolved blood can mix? How do you know you are right?”

“I’ve told you. Science. I’m not some witch-doctor, or quack. I’ve tested my theorem thoroughly. Every time we bring in a prisoner I give them a little of my blood first, and they always take it without harm. We’re entirely logical here, captain.” Finished, she fixed him with a look that reminded him of Diane, or perhaps Tetrazzini.

Suddenly the door behind him opened, causing the Mariner to jump, but it was only the blond woman from before, returning from her errand, and the Mariner found a glass pushed into his hand. It contained an amber liquid that pleasingly turned out to be a pungent scotch. Unable to hold back he gulped it down. Momentarily lost in his dependency, the Mariner closed his eyes, concentrating on the warmth that flowed down his throat and the, not wholly unpleasant, ache in his stomach. It was a welcome heat after the chill of Mavis’ teachings.

“Captain, I’d like to introduce you to Heidi. Between her and Harris the whole operation we have here is held together.”

“Heidegger,” the woman said, stiffly shaking the Mariner’s hand, draining what little warmth he’d sapped from the scotch.

Passing the glass back to Heidi for a refill, the Mariner decided to address a suspicion he’d felt when listening to Harris’ report. “This Anomenemy Harris captured, I think I might have met her before.”

“Really?” Mavis was intrigued. “And what makes you think that?”

“I met a creature, human in appearance, though straight away it was clear she was something more. She was known as the Oracle, but she had no truths of her own to share, only stolen thoughts. And once thoughts were stolen from her victims, they became Mindless, zombies if you prefer, violent unthinking shells. It sounds like the same Anomenemy that destroyed Harris’ crew.”

“It certainly does,” Mavis said, indicating for Heidi to bring the Mariner his next drink, keen to keep him talking.

As she poured, Heidi took over the explanation. “We heard rumours of an Oracle and tracked it down to an island. An island, I might add, that was a bit of an anomaly itself. But we dealt with the living rocks around it. Dynamite!” Heidi sounded pleased with the incredible feat, but the Mariner wondered if what she said was true, or just wishful thinking? The coral had seemed vast and unconquerable.

“I left Harris and his crew to capture the creature whilst I returned to resume protection of the Beagle. That was a mistake. He clearly became overwhelmed.”

Heidi passed the Mariner a second drink. As it entered his hand he promised himself that he would make it last, a promise he broke mere moments later.

“It seems we met the same Oracle.”

Heidi nodded. “And it escaped us both.”

“Why bring them back here?” he asked, turning to Mavis. “Why not kill them where they’re found?”

“Research. Learning. Before they are put to death we must see what facts can be squeezed out. Perhaps after this latest mishap I need to change that policy. This Anomenemy needs deleting, and we can’t risk it infecting any more with its power. Captain, I want you to take Heidi to this island Harris’ ship crashed into. There she will find this Oracle and kill it. You will do this?”

Without any hesitation, the Mariner agreed.

“Excellent, you’ll have our assistance should you need it. But for now go and eat, stock up on supplies, it’s the least we can do for returning young Harris to our fold.”

Captain Heidegger took the Mariner by the arm and, not too gently, ushered him out, through the dimly lit research room and back into the corridor. No sooner as she closed the door on the old inquisitor, did she suddenly turn and push him against the wall, uneven panels jabbing his back.

“Just what the fuck aren’t you telling us?” Her eyes were aflame, the surprising fury leaving the Mariner aghast. Too vast a collection of thoughts and emotions were coursing through his head. On the one hand, here he was on a strange ship surrounded by another possibly hostile cult; true they seemed friendly now, but weren’t they always at first? On the other hand, he’d just had two whiskeys on an empty, practically starving, stomach, and now pushed round by a rather attractive young woman.

“I haven’t told you all sorts of things,” he mused. “But nearly all of them are irrelevant.”

“You think that’s funny? Harris’ crew are dead, or at the very least lost to us. And yet here you are, claiming not only to have encountered the Anomenemy responsible, but that you managed to escape *unscathed*?”

“Not entirely,” the Mariner’s retort was bitter as he remembered a devil lying dead in the sand.

“But you did survive, which means you’re not stupid. And yet you were stupid enough to seek out a creature calling itself an ‘Oracle’. So tell me this: what’s the real reason you visited that island?”

“What can I say? I’m a curious fellow.”

The Mariner tried to pull away, but the woman had the advantage, though it was taking most of her weight and energy to achieve.

“Bullshit!” She pressed him harder, jamming her arm into his neck. Two thoughts seeped into his brain. The first was how restricted his breath had become. The second, that her breasts were pressed against his chest.

“Okay!” he relented, croaking the words. “I’m searching for a specific island. It’s ringed by some sort of barrier. I thought the Oracle might have been it, but it wasn’t. Just another trap.”

“Why search?”

“I don’t know. I don’t remember how it began.”

Heidi released the pressure just enough for him to breathe, yet not enough to relax. Suspicion clearly still upon him.

“And knowing this *Anomenemy* is nothing more than a trap, a freak, an anomaly of nature, you’re willing to go back and risk its presence again?”

This point had him stumped. He hadn’t reluctantly agreed, he’d *leapt* at the chance. And why? Because of a dream?

“The Wasp,” he whispered. “I believe she knows of the Wasp.”

Heidi frowned, her anger gone and replaced with uncertainty.

“Is that another Anomenemy?”

The Mariner rubbed his neck, painful dimples where she’d crushed him against a pipe. “I don’t know. Have you heard of it?”

“Sounds vaguely familiar but..” Heidi shook her head, drawing a blank. “Perhaps an Anomenemy spoke of it before its death and we missed it somehow.”

“Perhaps you should try talking instead of killing?”

“If you think that then you haven’t met enough of them.”

You’re wrong, he thought, remembering the eels. *I’ve met plenty.*

Heidi backed away, appraising him with her eyes. Finally she nodded and started down the corridor.

“Are you coming or not? I think a man like you could do with more of that whiskey.”

Amidst the bustle of the ship’s kitchen, the Mariner and Heidi sat upon a small work surface free from activity. Heidi, being second in authority only to Mavis herself, found no trouble at all acquiring a large bottle of scotch, which she emptied into two steins, originally designed for carrying beer, yet generously put to their new task. They drank the fiery liquid, watching a room that never slept.

“How many people are involved?” the Mariner asked, staring in wonder at the huge amount of food being prepared. Sweet scents of roasted meats teased his nose, spices ticked his throat, and chopped onions stung his eyes. Never in his existence had he imagined so many different foods collected in one place.

“Close to three hundred at the last tally,” she said. “Though more join with every day. We offer a slice of the old-world. That’s more than most can resist.”

“Three hundred,” he repeated, whistling through his teeth. “I have no idea how you manage to hold it all together.”

“It’s tough. We had an awful shortage of supplies a while back. Not just food, but medicines, ammo and spare parts. Fortunately we found an old crashed cruise ship to plunder. That solved the food shortages, and once bellies are full, other issues seem to matter less.”

“So you’re looters?”

“Not all the time. Sometimes we get supplies in exchange for services.”

“Services?”

“Killing... Anomenemies,” she added as if needing to clarify.

“Does everyone buy into the old lady’s theories?”

Heidi tilted her head, squinting at the Mariner. In the warm light of the kitchen, she seemed beautiful. Not just from youth, but from a confidence utterly unknown in the Mariner’s world.

“You don’t agree with Mavis’ analysis?”

"I've met many mystics and preachers. All promising truths. Right or wrong, she's one amongst many."

"No," she shook her head, loose hair shimmering in the light, enthralling his inebriated brain. "They were superstitious fools, living in ignorance, no doubt contributing to the problem rather than reducing it. Mavis is not like that. Her arguments are justified by science, not faith."

He shrugged and drank his whiskey.

"You don't believe me?"

"I don't understand. Science? All I know is what makes sense, and you make as much as anyone else."

"You'll change your mind. When we find this Wasp of yours, we'll get to the bottom of it." With a hint of sadness she added, "things will make sense again."

The Mariner, eyes blurry and manipulated by lust and booze, looked longingly at the captain. She saw his gaze and mistook the admiration for pity, so shook the sadness from her shoulders in one graceful push.

"You're lucky to be alive."

"Really?" he asked, surprised at the comment.

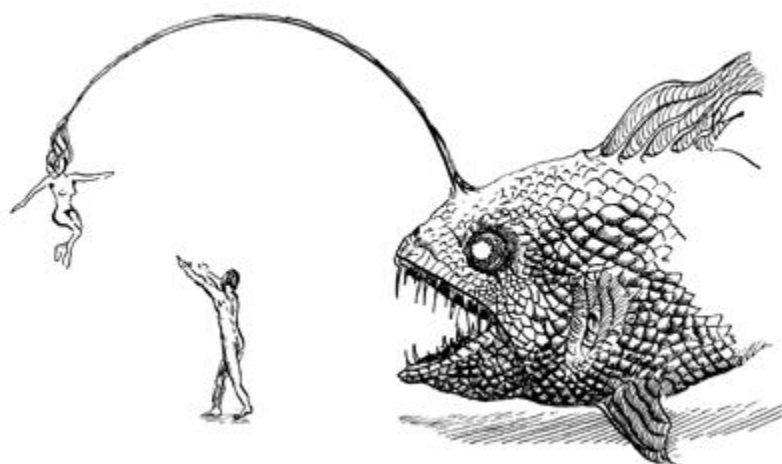
"Yes. If you hadn't brought Harris back to us of your own free will, he would have killed you for your ship."

"You know this?"

"He's a ruthless bastard that one, but committed to our cause. A good captain."

"And are you a good captain?"

She flashed him a drunken smile. A real prize-winner. "The best."



33

ALL DRESSED UP AND NOWHERE TO GO

THE WHOLE CIRCUMFERENCE OF THE zoo was peppered with rocks and the Kraken proved a sad sight, split upon several jagged boulders, half its bulk straddling the land like a rutting hippo. Wooden beams lay scattered around the cracked hull, splintered and lethal, whilst pools of shadowy water invaded the carcass. To all those gathered outside it appeared nothing more than a tomb. In many ways she was similar to the Neptune in age and construction, and the sight of her cracked carapace was a solemn goodbye to an aged beauty.

The island was quiet, not even the monkeys were making a chatter; they had recently learnt the hard way of the dangers of drawing attention. Grace stood between McConnell and the Mariner, a hand of each clasped in her own, whilst Heidi and Harris organised their followers into position, securing the nearby foliage and setting up sniper

positions. Scouts reported the zoo to be safe, but they were taking no chances.

The second confrontation with the Mindless that inhabited Grace's zoo had been far less fraught with danger than the first. Mavis' soldiers stalked the forest, executing anything that moved. The initial rush had been chaotic and violent, with the Mindless bellowing their unifying gibberish and charging as one unthinking mass, yet the landing party had been ready. Volley after volley cut through their once-loyal fellows, now ruined by the Oracle's tinkering. Now they were nothing more than zombies, cannon-fodder for their previous allies. Even Harris, who had presumably once had a close relationship with these men, seemed now to show little remorse in putting them down. These weren't human beings anymore, they were anomalies of science, ready to be scrubbed out.

Afterwards it had been a slow and thorough search, cleansing the land of the Anomenemies that had taken over it. Along with the occasional Mindless strewn about the forest floor, they found Diane's cult, heads smashed open and brains smeared amongst the twigs and leaves. Diane herself was recovered from the dolphin pool, drowned, cold and bloated.

Megan, Cedrick and Mary, the survivors of Diane's misguided cult, were advised to stay behind aboard the Beagle and wait. There was nothing inside the zoo for them to see, only the grim reality of what their home had become, and besides, they were busy trying to find a place for themselves amongst Mavis' strange order, naturally slipping from one cult to the next.

And finally the landing-party found the crashed ship that had spilt its deadly cargo. A secure perimeter established,

they waited for the signal to board.

“What makes you think the Oracle will still be in there?” the Mariner asked Harris, who was keeping close to the three, letting Heidi take the lead in coordinating, acting as a diplomat, or a guard to the three guests.

“We had her locked up in the brig. Unless she can command these zombies, and I suspect she can’t, we’ll find her there. I wouldn’t get your hopes up on speaking with her, it’s been a week, she’ll be starved by now.”

The Mariner looked down at Grace, who’d stubbornly demanded to accompany them, despite both of her adopted guardians insisting she should stay behind.

“Are you sure you want to go in? You’ll be safe out here, we’re just going for a little chat, that’s all.”

“You’ve met her before, right?” she said, biting her lip.

“That’s right.”

“And she didn’t hurt you?”

“Not directly, no. But promise me you won’t look into her eyes, or even respond to any questions she may ask? Let me do the talking.” He looked at McConnell who was nodding along in agreement. “That goes for you too. Whatever else she is, she’s a thief, and she can steal with just a glance. No talking, got it?”

Both nodded and he felt Grace’s small hands clench a little tighter. Harris, who’d been watching the exchange, knelt down to speak with her, wet sand soaking his knees.

“Don’t worry, we’re all armed. Nothing bad can happen.”

Grace gave a brave, unconvincing smile.

Heidi, preoccupied with the deployment of her crew, now gave the all-clear to proceed. Four armed troops waded through the shallow waters into the belly of the Kraken, each pointing their guns into the shadows, scanning for the slightest movement. The Mariner watched as they took positions, just inside the opening, allowing for a second group to move in.

A voice called from inside, with a second affirmation echoing the first. All was clear. With a hand on her holstered pistol, Heidi waded towards to boat.

“Are you ready?” the Mariner asked his companions. Their agreement was set in their grim expressions. It was time to speak with the Oracle.

As they waded through the water, the sight of the ship’s name caught the Mariner’s eye. ‘Kraken’ written in bold dark lettering upon a peeling board, haphazardly nailed in place. Whatever this ship’s true past, efforts had been made to make her anew. Lipstick on a corpse.

Inside smelt rotten. In the initial confusion that had seen Harris dive to the safety of the ocean, many of those who hadn’t succumbed to mindlessness had been torn to pieces and left to decay. Their putrid bodies now lay scattered throughout the water clogged passages; corpses ridden with crabs and other scavenging pests. The salt in the air gave their stink an almost pickled quality and several of the scout parties were forced to stagger, retching into the shallow pools.

As they climbed, rising higher through the internal body of the Kraken, Mavis’ disciplined soldiers flanked them, always taking turns to scout out the passageways on all sides,

forever on the lookout for Mindless. None were found, the boat was deserted.

Because of the dim light and the slanted angle of the Kraken's demise, the ascent was slow, yet this was Harris' ship and he was able to direct the group on the fastest route to the brig. In and out. No distractions. No talk of rescuing or repairing the ship itself; it had been claimed by the elements. The Kraken had died.

"We're here," Harris whispered, cradling a long ornate double-barrelled shotgun, silver trim glinting in the light of a dozen flash-lights. "That door there."

One of the guards moved to open it, but the Mariner restrained him.

"No, let me. If she sees a familiar face, she might not struggle."

He crept forward and inched open the door.

Inside was a large room, half bare, the chairs and desk that once adorned it now laying upturned in a corner. The other half was separated into three barred cells, with little more than a wooden board jutting out of the wall acting as a bed.

Only two of the cells were empty.

The Oracle sat in the third, like a dignitary about to play host, just as ethereal in beauty as he'd first experienced. If Harris had been hoping that her incarceration would have weakened her, he was going to be disappointed. Flesh glowed with health, eyes sparkled. One could think her reclining within the cell of her own free will, and only for a matter of minutes, rather than locked there for several weeks, the last of which without nourishment.

Her eyes widened with delight as he entered the room.

“Claude! Oh Claude! How wonderful to see you again. I was saddened by your abrupt departure, there was so much to discuss. And how silly of me not to recognise you. I recognise you now though. Very clearly.”

The Mariner slowly walked towards her cage, the others filing in behind. The Oracle’s smile faltered as she saw his accomplices.

“Oh, Claude, you’ve fallen in with bad company. How sad.” She began searching their faces with her piercing eyes, finally falling on Harris. “And the captain! Back for more games?” Her silky words slithered through the bars. “Loose lips sink ships, wouldn’t you say?”

“Look at the ground, don’t speak to her. Unless you want to end up like the last crew.” The Mariner glared at those behind until they averted their gaze from the caged creature.

“Claude, how could you?” she chuckled in mock anguish. “The least you could have done is bring your friend, he was delightful. So many stories, so much history. Delicious.”

“He’s dead.”

The Oracle shifted uncomfortably. “Dead? Oh my, how sad.”

It doesn’t like not knowing, he thought as he stared at her, powerful yet vulnerable in her enclosure. It’s not used to having to ask. It prefers to take.

“Not interested in my thoughts?” Her sour expression, oh so brief across an expertly-honed mask, betrayed the truth in his teasing.

“That would be rude wouldn’t it?” she retorted, smooth once more. “I just want to talk. If only we’d talked sooner we could have both avoided falling in with our mutual friends here.” She leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially. “They will be the death of *you*, you know.”

But the Mariner was not going to be diverted. “You tried to steal my thoughts before, but couldn’t. Why not?”

“There’s nothing to steal!” she snapped, bitterness returning. “Nothing in your head at all!”

Ice deep in his chest. *The Wasp took everything else.*

“That’s not all.”

“No, you’re right, it isn’t!” she spat, suddenly seeming childish and petty, striking out to hurt.

She’s an infant, he thought, suddenly understanding an aspect of the creature before him. *It’s subtle, but it’s there; she’s merely a child, and she doesn’t understand what’s happening.*

“Your mind stinks! It makes me want to puke. Urrgh! Yuk! I wouldn’t eat a thought from your head if I’d been in this cell a thousand years. I think a Gradelding must have snuck up during your sleep and shat in your skull. Or perhaps you fell in the sea and the Ethusmanier laid eggs in your ear? Yes, perhaps that’s what must have put that stink in there?”

“Or perhaps it was the Wasp?”

The Oracle suddenly stopped her ranting and her once knowing, then furious, eyes widened with fright. Colour drained from them, as colour would drain from a frightened cheek.

“What do you know of the Wasp? How could you? Unless?” Her hands suddenly flew up, covering her face. “Unless?” Fear became terror. The Oracle leapt to her feet, jumping up onto her bunk as if he were a rat nipping at her toes. “Get away from me! Get away! Don’t look at me with that horrid head of yours! Don’t bring the Wasp here!”

“What is the Wasp?” He grabbed the bars, pressing his face closer, eager to learn. “Where can I find it?”

“I didn’t wake it! I wasn’t the one! The Pope, he knows! The Pope! The Pope!” she screamed, bawling like a frightened toddler. “Just stop looking at me. Please, please leave me alone! The Pope woke it, it’s his fault!”

Behind him, the Mariner heard an intake of breath.

“What is it?” he whispered.

“The Pope!” Heidi hissed back, although the Oracle, still wailing and shrieking, was beyond listening. “We’ve been searching for him as long as any Anomenemy. He’s worshipped across the whole ocean.”

“Where is this Pope?” he yelled at the Oracle. “Where is he?”

“North! Past the waterfall, where the air is cold and the Ethusmanier swim. He lives on the Moors, not the sea. He hates the sea. I would too if I’d woken the Wasp!”

“But what is it? What is the Wasp? What’s happening to the world? Is the Wasp a demon, stealing our world from us, is that it?”

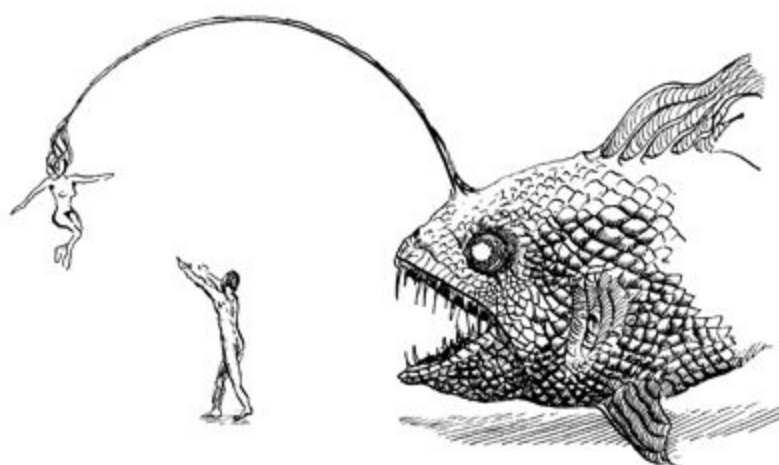
The Oracle, suddenly stopped crying and peered at him between her fingers. “No, you’ve gotten it all wrong, the Wa-”

The gap between her fingers exploded with dark blood as a bullet pierced her hand and then her face, shattering skull, snuffing out life. The creature known as the Oracle was thrown back against the wall, where she stood for a second or so, teetering on shaky legs, before sliding down into a heap. Stunned silence followed and the Mariner, ears ringing, turned to Harris, his shotgun still smoking from the blast.

“We have the location of the Pope,” he said, unapologetic. The Mariner’s fury was dark. “He’s the most notorious Anomenemy in the whole ocean. Other than that, I can’t see how listening to any further heresy can help.”

“It was going to tell us the truth!”

“What truth?” Harris laughed. “Do you think that creature knew anything? You’re not the only one to spend time with that witch. She was mad, and she’d tell you anything to buy her own freedom. But that doesn’t stop it being nonsense. Besides, we know what’s happening to the world. Mavis told us. We know what needs to be done.”



“WORD OF THE POPE FIRST came to us through graffiti scrawled on walls within abandoned ships. Usually they would be in the most squalid of cabins, the sort littered with drugs and faeces, but later they appeared in more extravagant abodes. At first we thought they were deluded references to some shared hallucination, a mass dream if you will, but as we began scavenging more and more vessels, we began to realise that the Pope was real, and had wide reach.”

Heidi spoke with a slow sincerity, easily heard by those gathered around her upon the Neptune, a small fire lighting their faces in an otherwise stiflingly dark night. McConnell sat behind Grace, with her leaning against him, not just for warmth, but for protection from the ghost story being told, for that’s what the Pope had become across the endless ocean: a whispered ghost story.

Crowded aboard the Neptune were a number of Mavis’ loyal followers, those chosen to remain with Heidi and Harris whilst they searched for the Pope. The rest had been returned to the Beagle, to protect the old lady and her research.

The devils, suspicious of strangers as ever, had growled and spat at the new crew, before scampering into the lower chambers where they could have peace. For the Mariner himself it was all part of an ever increasingly uncomfortable intrusion, like being put on display. Still, if it helped him find the Pope, the Wasp, and the Island, then perhaps the discomfort was worth it.

“I’ve heard of the Pope,” said McConnell. “But only a little. It was something sailors used to talk about in Sighisoara, though they were careful to hide their words near me. I’m a religious man, and they knew not to bring heresy to my

door, yet still I couldn't help but pick up scraps of information here and there. His followers lurk at all ends of the world, though I've never met one myself. Crazy I hear, *and* dangerous, all dreaming of performing some sort of pilgrimage to receive his blessing."

Heidi confirmed McConnell's story. "We've heard that too, some event called 'Mass', though what goes on is a mystery. We've never found one of their followers alive to interrogate."

"But you have found followers?" The Mariner was intrigued.

"Oh yes, but dead. *Long* dead. Most of the time suicide, but sometimes I'm just not sure. I can't imagine someone mutilating themselves to such extremes just to end their own life."

"So what do you think happened?"

"Rivalries in the sect? Internal struggles? It's impossible to tell without understanding how his cult operates. What we suspect is that he's an Anomenemy, perhaps *the greatest* Anomenemy, the one with influence enough that it'll make all the difference once he's removed."

"So this Moor the Oracle mentioned, do you think that's where the Mass is held?"

"It's the only clue we've ever had."

McConnell was surprised that the Mariner only asked questions. "Arthur, you've travelled more than the rest of us, surely you've heard of the Pope?"

He could only shake his head in response, he'd never heard the name before. Something about it rang a bell, but his

shroud of ignorance proved too thick. "Perhaps I haven't been asking the right questions."

"What about this Wasp of yours then? What's that all about?"

"I don't know. Just a name." The Mariner clenched his hands in frustration. "It's somewhere, lodged inside. I just can't get at it." He looked up at McConnell, his eyes tired. "Does it mean anything to you?"

McConnell thought for a moment, massaging his temples. "I remember sitting in Lloyd's Park, back in Croydon. It was one of those rare days in summer when you can actually sit in the sun and feel *warm* for a change. Not that false warmth that we sometimes kid ourselves into believing we're experiencing, but genuine heat. I was relaxing, sitting back in the grass, when this wasp came and landed upon my hand. Instinct told me to kill it, or try to shake it off, but a logical part of me said, *that's how you get stung! Let it be. These creatures don't want to sting you, they're just insects reacting to their environment. Let it be and it'll fly away in its own time.* So I held my hand still and watched the wasp as it trotted across my hand, as leisurely as you please. And you know what? It looked at me."

"Insects don't look at you!" Grace giggled.

"It did! It looked right at me, into my eyes with its beady black ones. And do you know what happened next?"

"What?"

"The bastard stung me! It looked me right in the eye and jabbed me with its fat behind!" The audience began to laugh, but the reverend wasn't done. "Any normal beast would have reacted to this, but not I! I am a free-thinking

rational human being. I wasn't going to react to a bit of pain. So I tensed, but did not move. No wasp was going to force me into retaliation. I was going to do the rational thing and let it fly off, none-the-wiser to the offence it had caused."

The audience, enjoying the light hearted distraction leaned in close for the inevitable climax.

"But did it fly off? Did it bollocks! The damned thing walked across my hand and then - I swear I'm not making this up - it looked me in the eye, just as before, did a little jig, and stung me again!"

Giggling, Grace teased the reverend. "That's cos you're dumb." He laughed and jabbed her in the side, making her squeal.

"It was then that I learned," he concluded, "that wasps are the only creatures outside of primates that act like man. They're vicious, spiteful little monsters. Just like us." McConnell's eyes glazed over for a moment as he recalled something from long ago. "'Cancer won't catch and wasps won't sting, man would owe no God a thing.'"

"What's that?" the Mariner asked, curious at the little chant.

"Something I used to tease my father with. It wound him up. 'In a perfect world.. yadda yadda yadda.' It meant that most of the world's problems - *the old world* - stemmed from religion. All that fucked up shit in the Middle-East, Northern Ireland, Africa, everywhere. All down to religion." He sighed and looked into the fire, his face suddenly drawn. "I was wrong though. Or right, depending on how you look at it. Turns out we do owe God something, and this ain't a perfect world."

After a long period of silence, McConnell spoke again. "Perhaps you have been asking the wrong questions? Perhaps there's nothing to seek out at all?"

The Mariner gave McConnell a warning glance, urging him not to begin on his Jesus Haych Christ theory again, but the reverend continued regardless, addressing Heidi with his ideas.

"Things are falling apart. They disappear, they are forgotten, they are lost to us."

"Yes," she agreed. "It's the influence of the Anomenemies, undermining the natural laws."

"Well, I call it the Shattering, and in all my years I've never seen anything *come back*. Have you?"

"No, never. Though it would be difficult to know when something forgotten returns. You might not notice."

"True, but some things are unmissable. Such as whole islands."

Harris, who'd previously been keeping quiet and listening to the exchange, responded. "Hang on, are you saying you've seen an island pop into existence?"

"I have," McConnell nodded. "The zoo upon which your ship crashed used to be a part of Sighisoara, the town I am from. But one day it tore itself from the mainland and drifted away, not just physically, but in the town's collective consciousness too. Most forgot; only a couple of us remembered and soon learnt to keep quiet. Eventually it disappeared from the horizon altogether."

"So what happened? How did it come back?"

“These two brought it back,” he said, tapping Grace on the head and then pointing to the Mariner. “They brought it back by remembering!”

Grace sank into his lap, embarrassed by the sudden attention. The Mariner himself continued to stare into the fire. What was the point of all this?

“If only we could remember all the things that are lost, or make sure that nothing else becomes forgotten.. then maybe.” He shrugged, suddenly finding himself out on a limb without a proper theory. “I don’t know, but I saw the island return. I saw it. And it wasn’t returned by killing monsters or breaking déjà vu, but by two people focusing their minds.”

“Why these two?” Harris asked.

Don’t say it, thought the Mariner.

“Well...”

Don’t!

“I think they are special.”

Fortunately for the Mariner, McConnell stopped there, feeling a bit foolish. No-one laughed though, Heidi and Harris studied the three travellers closely, mulling over McConnell’s speech. The Mariner could feel their minds whirring. “Enough,” he said even though they’d been sitting in silence for a minute or so. “We’ll explore other ideas once we’ve found the Pope, whoever he is, and make him talk.” Stretching out on the deck, he took a swig from his hip flask, forever kept full now they’d been able to resupply at the Beagle. It hurt his stomach, but felt nice to have the thoughts in his head subdued. “This is my ship, so my rules.

Shut up and get some sleep.”

The journey north lasted several weeks, and in that time the people aboard slowly began to become acclimatised to each other. Mavis’ foot soldiers, twelve in total, intimidating in their initial anonymity, revealed themselves in truth to be a varied collection of refugees, with stories similar to any other in the endless sea. Lives spent in confusion at being torn away from a world that made sense, into one that did not.

Eventually McConnell overcame his reluctance to share his faith, and soon set to preaching his Shattered Testament to any who’d listen, which, surprising to the Mariner, was a fair number of Mavis’ followers of ‘science’. Fortunately, McConnell never explained the link he’d made between his faith and the Mariner, but he did catch Heidi glancing in his direction when McConnell had spoken at length of Christ’s return.

The devils never overcame their distrust of the new shipmates, only venturing above deck to pester for food or to get a quick pet from Grace, who was enjoying the fresh bustle of the Neptune. Harris in particular spent a great deal of time with her, teaching her how to shoot. McConnell had disapproved, though couldn’t voice a genuine reason why she shouldn’t learn. Self-defence was invaluable.

Slowly, day by day, the weather grew colder. Furs and blankets became necessary to shelter from chilly winds, and rain ceased to provide refreshment and now became a miserable huddled affair.

They navigated using the sun, heading roughly, yet steadily north, though after a week talk amongst the crew began to

grow doubtful. How did they know they were on the right track? Where was this Moor the Oracle spoke of? Had it all been a cruel trick?

And then, just as it looked like they would have to give in and consider an alternative route, they saw it. The Waterfall.

Rising out of the ocean like an impenetrable wall, the waterfall tumbled from an invisible river, cascading down from an aperture a hundred feet in the air, with no landmass or other source to be seen. The roar from it soared across the sea, sounding like a constant growl of some gigantic beast. Around the waterfall was a thick mist, water vapour constantly blown out and away from the tumbling tonnage, saturating the air and soaking the clothes of every person aboard, even though they must have been a mile or so from the actual fall itself. The sheer volume cascading down into the ocean was immense; this was not a thin stream, but a long rectangular sheet of water, humbling in its majesty.

However, it was not the scale of the waterfall that had them all dumb-struck, but the source – the water was falling from the sky. It were as if some lining in the air had torn, allowing an infinite amount of water to come tumbling through. It was beautiful in its simplicity, a single vast column of water, forever falling to violent collision with the world beneath.

But as they glided closer, the falsehood of this became apparent. There was something beyond the water, some stone behind the froth and mist. And as they scrutinised the origin of the falls they began to notice that there was something surrounding the water's mouth, a grey casing from which the liquid fell.

"It's a building," Harris' voice was saturated with wonder. "Look up there, those are windows. The water's coming from

inside the top floor."

And indeed, once he'd drawn their attention to it, the Neptune's crew could clearly see the block's outline. Some parts of the grey concrete had crumbled away, most noticeably the majority of sections between windows, but the roof remained intact; a thin dark outline above glistening white falls, an ugly mouth through which beauty spewed.

Heidegger shivered. "It's an office block. Just an ugly office block."

"Croydon used to be full of them," McConnell said. "But none that gushed an endless supply of water. That'd have to be a hell of a burst pipe."

"Where do you think it comes from? Is it being pumped up from the inside?"

No-one had an answer to give. The Mariner expected McConnell to make some statement about the source being God, but surprisingly the reverend kept his mouth shut.

They watched for some time as it slowly drifted along the horizon, at first ahead, but then slowly sliding along to the left. None had any desire to go near it; the falls filled every last passenger with a deep fear, though what of, none could precisely say. Perhaps simply its scale was intimidating enough. Harris muttered to himself fears about the world filling up, but most kept their paranoia to themselves, though despite their reticence, none could remove their eyes from the spectacle.

All apart from the Mariner, who felt quite the opposite. Something about the waterfall disgusted him, every time he looked upon it, nausea would swell in his throat and the pit

of his stomach. He tried to tell himself it was the alcohol he'd consumed, but this was a blatant lie. Something about it made him jittery. Instead of looking at the falls, he found himself idly staring at the dark choppy waters below.

Something slick and dark caught his eye.

It was the briefest of flashes from in the depths, but just that was enough; the Mariner had learned to recognise these creatures through pain and blood. An old wound in his crotch throbbed, a reminder of the extreme lengths he'd gone to escape such creatures before.

"Everyone below deck!"

"What is it?" Heidegger's eyes frantically studied his face for clues.

"Eels!"

"What?"

"I encountered them before; they pull fantasies from your head as bait."

"Sirens? Like those old myths?"

"They're Anomenemies!" Harris pulled his shotgun from its holster. "They need to be destroyed!"

"No!" The Mariner grabbed the gun by the barrel and yanked it from his hands. "This is my ship and we're not taking the risk! If you like, return later and hunt the damn things with harpoons. We're going to find the Pope and the Wasp and I'm not going to let you derail that!"

Harris barely had a chance to resist as the Mariner forced him below deck. The others followed, herded by the alarm in the Mariner's voice.

He hastily ushered them down into the cabins. "No-one's to venture above, no matter what you hear. Not until I say so. Am I clear?"

Confused and in shock, the crew agreed, and the Mariner began to leave.

Grace grabbed his arm, alarmed at his departure. "Where are you going?"

"I need to put up a few defences, make sure the ship is going to take us through without harm. Don't worry, I'll be fine." He didn't give her a chance to protest, he slammed the door shut and ran back up the stairs.

Outside, the ocean was still fairly quiet, the only sound the distant roar of the waterfall. After such an explosion of activity, the Mariner felt disorientated by his own thudding heart in the still climate. His eyes searched the waters for some sign that his fears had been true.

For a time he saw none, yet slowly the eels began to show themselves. They didn't seem to be the same as the last shoal, who had streaked about his boat in frenzy. These seemed sluggish and tired. He found himself wondering if they were the same creatures. Were they starved? During his first encounter, they had seemed desperate.

Transfixed by the slow moving eels, the Mariner trembled with anticipation. He should be below deck, hiding from the sea-monsters, but he couldn't bring himself to leave. What he'd told Grace had been a lie; there were no defences to erect, no preparations to be done, he merely wanted to see

what the eels had to show. The very hint of them had summoned something other than fear: lust. There was no resisting.

Perhaps those same beauties he'd seen before would return to copulate? He'd just watch this time, he felt stronger, more in control. No going overboard. This time he would use the eels, rather than them use him. The Mariner felt himself becoming aroused at the thought of the wonders he might see.

Slowly, something began to rise out of the water. An arm, pale and delicate, stretched, gripping the surface for leverage. The Mariner caught his breath at the sight of the feminine creature climbing out to lure him. He leaned forward, one hand steadying himself, the other reaching into his trousers, teasing his member to life.

Forgotten was the roar of the waterfall, only the sound of his pounding heart in his ear. He would watch just a little, and then go below where he'd be safe. Just a little. Just a minute.

A second arm and then a head pulled up from the waves, and the Mariner began to stroke himself, imagining what was about to appear.

But what did froze his heart and froze his wrist.

The fantasy pulling itself up out of the water was Grace. She was dressed as she was now, though less detailed, more like a hasty copy that kept the key details whilst jettisoning those too complex to replicate.

"Grace?" he asked, baffled. Why had the eels pulled her out of his mind?

The Grace-illusion stood upon the waves, shimmering weakly in the light of day, occasionally translucent as though the image was difficult to maintain. Her eyes were closed and face quite blank, as if in sleep.

Frozen to the spot, the Mariner still had a hand wrapped around his engorged penis, but the shock at this unexpected sight had rendered his own gratification forgotten. Or was it? If this had been dragged from his deep guttural desires, hadn't it been what he'd been praying for? Wasn't this his *true* desire?

He watched, unable to move, as her hand slid up from her side, crossing her stomach. The movement was sluggish and dreamlike, definition about the arm blurring. For a brief moment the fingers upon her hand melded together into one solid flipper, only to return to individual digits a second later. They paused as they reached the neck of her dress, a stillness dripping in anticipation.

Understanding what was about to happen, the Mariner tried to look away. A mixture of shame and confusion had paralysed him. Any second his shipmates could return and see his demons made real, his shame in the flesh. They would see his dark fantasies and condemn him, for only a monster could lust for such a thing.

And as he'd dreaded, Grace moved her tiny hand down, pulling the dress with it. It peeled like fruit, falling purposefully apart to reveal pale young flesh. Except it wasn't as he'd expected, the flesh was bruised and beaten, great red welts and scratches dragged across, tiny nipples surrounded by bite marks instead of the swellings of puberty.

Her face was still, and the Mariner realised that it was not through sleep, but from death. Grace was dead, and yet still her hand descended, down past her belly and between her legs.

The Mariner finally broke from the scene and vomited. In the struggle to remove his hand from his trousers to steady himself, he tangled, sending the bile down his leg instead of the deck.

Was this his nature? Was he no better than Tetrizzini? No, he was worse; his desires were darker, more destructive. The eels did not lie, this was the truth.

Vision began to waver as he staggered away, but still he kept moving. He had to get below deck, he had to blot out this monstrous fantasy displayed for his pleasure. Groaning to disguise the sounds of sexual abuse reaching his ears, the Mariner staggered below, slipping and falling down the steps in his haste.

“Arthur?” a voice called from inside. Panic and shame erupted once more, sending a jolt through his body.

“Stay the fuck in there!” he screamed, staggering to his feet and like a wounded beast flung himself down the hall until he reached a room he knew to be empty. With a heavy slam he closed the door and put his weight against it, breath entering in huge gasps.

Jittery hands were raised to cover his face, but he couldn't hold them still. Instead he folded them across his chest, brought in tight. Curled in a ball, he rocked.

He hadn't been maintaining control, that much was clear. Deceived by companionship, he'd forgotten his true nature.

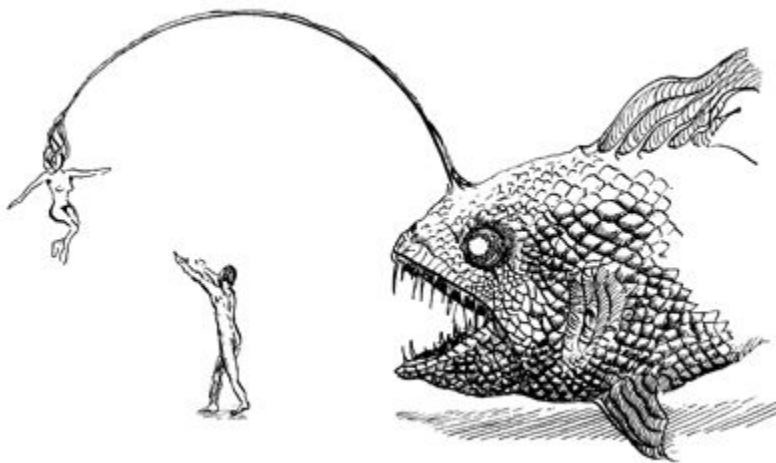
Well, not any-more. In the future he would be stricter. He *had* to be.

The cat 'o' nine tails was nowhere to be seen, lost some time ago, and he wasn't going to go looking for it. There was no time, he needed a distraction now; besides, there was a knife he kept sheaved in his boot. That would do.

Clumsily drawing it out, heart thudding so hard in his chest he thought he might die, the Mariner had little time to prepare. He brought it up in one swift swipe, slashing at his shirt sleeve, slicing through cloth and then the skin beneath. Fresh blood seeped into the already stained garment.

And yet the pain was too light a payment to blot out the vision, too feeble to end the horror. He twisted the blade and it grated against the bone. Was that a scratching he could hear? He imagined the blade carving a groove, a notch into the bone, a promise to himself to banish the demons.

But from the sounds beyond the boat still ringing in his ears, the Mariner's demons remained. So he dug the knife deeper.



CLIFFS SO DARK THEY WERE almost obsidian stretched across the horizon, the tops bathed in a deep mist. The mass of land was eerily wide, dominating the ocean as if in mockery of its former majesty. The Mariner had never seen such a vast island, and the rest of the crew were given a bitter reminder of how the world used to be long ago, before the Shattering.

It had been less than a week since passing the waterfall. Fortunately the crew had obeyed the Mariner's commands and not ventured above until he'd given the all-clear, and he hadn't dared look himself for two days, finally peeking his head out like a scared rat. He wouldn't have risen at all had it not been for the devils and their ever present hunger. After a prolonged period of claws scratching on wood he'd finally opened the door to a dozen unimpressed furry faces, each unconcerned with the inner turmoil plaguing their servant; why should they care for a monkey when there were bellies to fill?

Returning to sunlight presented a cold grey ocean. Bitter, joyless, even hopeless in its stubborn blank uniformity, but the waters were free from eels. Safely assured, he allowed the others to ascend. No-one mentioned the fresh blood stains upon his shirt, they were used to the mysterious red blots, and knew not to ask.

And now they'd finally arrived, though faced with an impenetrable circle of stone.

"Are these the moors?" McConnell asked, staring at the landscape as if it were a world-wonder.

"I would guess so," the Mariner said, wondering just how they would get up on top of them. The sheer scale of land

made him dizzy, how could something defy the sea so brazenly?

Heidi didn't seem fazed. "We keep sailing around until we find a place to land. If the Pope gets visitors, then there must be a dock. Perseverance will give him to us."

The Mariner agreed, and the Neptune began to circle the landmass, following it east, though after two days the cliffs did not abate, and the land showed little sign of ending.

"Incredible," Harris said at dawn on the following day. "Perhaps we should be settling here? Huge expanse of land and easy to defend. If there's fresh water up there, think of the possibilities!"

"And be only a couple of days from that waterfall?" McConnell shuddered. "I don't think so. I want to be as far from that thing as possible."

The cliff-face never relented, but later that day a groove appeared, running steeply down from the top into a small alcove, and to their surprise in this break in the rocks nestled a small collection of buildings, each tall and imposing, squashed into their small patch of land, yet tall like flowers straining for the sun.

"A village!" Harris laughed. "Well I'll be damned! How perfect!"

The village was built in an upside down 'v' shape, the point running some-way up the slope towards the summit, whilst the widest end straddled a small dock crammed with dainty fishing vessels. Despite the daylight, the town was mostly in shadow, and street-lamps were lit, giving the crevices between homes an inviting glow. After being entombed within the Neptune, the idea of stepping foot on dry land

tempted each and every one aboard, even the Mariner who grew evermore restless.

As the ship closed in on the port several figures could be seen unloading fish from a trawler into a cart. Harris pointed them out. "Populated. Perhaps we can trade for some food?"

The Mariner shrugged, never one for trading. "With what?"

"We have plenty of weapons. People always need bullets."

"I'm not sure I want anyone here to have bullets."

Harris shook his head in disbelief. "Everyone's armed, Arthur. This way we might get a proper bed for the night. No offence, but the Neptune isn't exactly comfortable."

Harris held the majority opinion, and just beyond the dock where the water was still deep enough, the Neptune halted and they lowered anchor, preparing to disembark. As if in support of their decision, a biting wind began to whip at their backs, urging them on the swifter.

"Shouldn't we leave someone behind to guard the ship?" Heidi asked as they began boarding the small row-boats to take them to shore. "What about pirates?"

The Mariner chuckled. "The devils will be protection enough, believe me; I think they'd welcome the entertainment."

The short journey to the dock was choppy, and it took several trips to bring the whole crew to shore, with each person dashing down the promenade into the shelter of the tall buildings as soon as they hit land, some pulling coats up to shield their faces from the hail that peppered the bluster.

“I think that must be an inn!” Harris shouted above the whistling wind and pointed down a dark street towards a large building with an ornate wooden fish hung outside it. A sign proudly displayed ‘The Drinking Carp’, written in large curly letters.

Grace, shivering despite the coat Harris had wrapped around her, spotted another welcoming abode, this time entitled ‘Robin’s Cave’. In fact, as they looked around, they realised the village was made up of nothing but inns, all lit up, some quiet and grim, whilst through the windows of others, large crowds could be seen, drinking to the tune of mercenary bards.

“We’re spoilt for choice!”

“How about that one then?” Grace was pointing down an alley to their left. Other than the main sign reading ‘The Drunken Pigeon’, was a secondary one claiming ‘the Best Fish and Chips – Guaranteed!’ Eager to get out of the cold air, the decision was unanimous, and they dashed as one, soaked to the bone by rain and sea-spray.

The door opened to a wide bar, decorated with soft chairs and the pungent smell of spilt beer. Several travellers were sat in the corners drinking from steins. They looked up, but didn’t seem surprised to see such a large crowd entering and returned to their private conversations, muttered secretly over frothy ale. The focal point of the room was the bar itself, with a plump and tough looking woman standing behind, chewing on a cold chicken leg, the grease about her lips looking like thick lip-gloss in the light from the nearby fireplace. She eyed them with a mixture of contempt and boredom. “Not enough room for you all. Got room for eight. Rest of you try next door, they’ve got spares.”

Harris, pulling rank, ushered most of Mavis' followers back out the door into the rainy street to try elsewhere, whilst Heidi spoke with the publican, haggling over the price of rooms. The landlady seemed pleased with the boxes of shotgun cartridges offered and opened a draw containing keys.

"Food's not included. Pay for a second night or be out by daybreak. No smoking or drinking unless in the bar. I've got enforcers if there's trouble," she added, glaring at the Mariner above the rest.

"We'll be gone early tomorrow," he said in similarly hostile tones, though his decision was quietly (yet hotly) dissented by Grace, who tugged at his jacket. "Can we get to the moors from here?"

"Of course you can," the woman's eyes narrowed even further, until they were tiny coin slots. "Everyone does."

"Get lots going up there, huh?" Harris asked as he returned to the bar, the din of rain on stone vanishing the moment the door swung shut.

"A fair number, yeah." The woman shrugged, non-committed, and though her body did its best to remain nonchalant, her eyes shrank further to tiny dark craters on an enormous fleshy planet. In the corner, her other patrons had stopped their discussion and were listening intently.

"It's their first time," Heidi said loudly enough for their eavesdroppers to hear. "I'm taking them up there."

"Never been myself," the woman muttered, still appraising them. "Don't much want to, got all I need right here." With that she slammed the keys down on the counter and sauntered off, as if to serve some other patrons, though of

course all the custom her business could handle were gathered right in front of her.

Heidi suggested that they do their best to dry off, a concept widely agreed upon. Soon a light cloud of steam was rising from their damp bodies as they gathered around the fire, shivering despite the warmth. Not long later, Harris bartered for a round of strong spirits 'to shake off the rain', though McConnell snatched Grace's before she had a chance to try it.

"You're too young for such things," he scolded as if the drink were a terrible and destructive sin, though still he held onto the beverage for himself. He lifted the glass to his lips and sipped, wincing as the heat hit his throat. He looked to the Mariner, who was already eagerly supping at his. Ever since they'd topped up supplies at the Beagle, the Mariner had kept himself in an almost permanent inebriated state. Not so much as to be unable to function, but never totally sober. McConnell didn't know if that was something to be concerned about or not. Best to worry about other things than the personal habits of such a dubious man. "So tomorrow we head up onto the moors, and then what?"

"We find him."

And that was that. It seemed no-one wanted to dwell upon the mysteries of what lay ahead, least of all those who seemed to be making the decisions for the rest. So instead, McConnell began to sing in a voice little more than a whisper competing with the fire's own crackling song. The song was one of melancholy, a mixture of English and Eastern European dialect. The tune was received with bafflement, none recognising the strange mix.

“They used to sing it in Sighisoara. I hadn’t heard it before...” McConnell waved his hands in disdain. “... all this. I lived in Croydon back then. Such different times, before the Shattering.”

“Do you know what I miss?” Harris said, leering over his whiskey. “Ozzy girls. I went travelling to Australia when I was younger and had a few. Up for anything they are! After that, I was always checking out pubs in Acton. That’s the part of London they all used to live. *Off to Acton for some action*. Sometimes it paid off too.” He sighed and looked back into the fire. “No Australians now. Just fucking Brits.”

“Funny that isn’t it,” Heidi said, though her tone insinuated there was nothing funny about it at all. “Ever since... I’ve only ever found Brits. And nearly all of them English.”

Almost surprised to have some evidence to the contrary, McConnell spoke up. “We had a French couple turn up in Sighisoara.”

“What happened to them?”

“Kept to themselves, no-one could speak French, not properly. Eventually they got stuck in an altercation over booze and got themselves killed. Bit difficult to resolve disputes with no common language. And this was before Tetrazzini showed up, so no-one knew any medicine-” He tensed, knowing he’d mentioned a name he shouldn’t have. Grace stiffened too, her eyes low.

“Who’s Tetrazzini?” Harris asked, curious.

An awkward silence followed, finally broken by Heidi. “So you’re from Croydon? I’m from North London, Hampstead Heath.”

He gave her a solemn smile. "Small world huh? If only our friend here could remember his origins?" He patted the Mariner on the shoulder. "Perhaps he would turn out from a similar neck of the woods? Bromley? Clapham?"

"Perhaps." The Mariner didn't see much point in trying to work out the insanity in which they lived. The Pope would tell them what the Oracle couldn't. He placed his glass down with a hollow thud. "Done."

Not long later, Harris negotiated a second round.

"I don't miss him," Grace whispered lightly over the crackling fire. It was towards the end of the evening, when most had crawled off to bed, leaving only those obsessed with the pursuit of oblivion chasing it like a dog after a butterfly. The Mariner had thought her asleep, her small figure, curled up in Harris' coat, hadn't moved for hours. McConnell, still by her side, had fallen asleep, lulled into unconsciousness by the disarming heat, and yet she'd remained awake, staring at the fire through slits so fine she'd appeared to slumber.

"Who?" he asked, more as a delaying tactic than an actual question. He knew full well whom she meant: Tetrazzini. Who else? She hadn't said a word since McConnell had mentioned the man. And now she wanted to voice those demons. Why couldn't she keep them locked away, like he did? Surely that was best?

"You know who," she replied, calling him out in one swipe. "Him."

I guess I do, but I don't want to talk about him. I don't want to think about leaving him to burn for what he did, because somewhere deep inside I think I'm the same. And if that's

true then I should burn too. I should burn as surely as he did, as surely as Absinth was ate. But I'm scared. I'm far too scared to burn.

"Christopher wants me to talk about... what he did, but I don't want to, I don't want to even *think* of him."

"Christopher?"

"Yeah." Her pristine forehead furrowed and realising she theatrically rolled her eyes. "The reverend."

The Mariner was surprised, McConnell had never told him his first name. Funny. Names were strange things, meaningless and yet given so much weight.

"I understand. I don't like to think about someone too."

"Who?"

Everyone I've hurt. Everyone I've killed.

"My mother. I don't remember her much, but what I do..." he stopped, the alcohol in his system loosening his tongue enough to speak, but not his brain enough to prevent protest. "She wasn't a good person."

"Like Dad?"

"He wasn't your father. Don't dignify him with the title." He meant it as a compliment, but tears quickly gathered in the young girl's eyes.

"He was my daddy, he was!"

"Shush! Hush now." He took her arm and gently rubbed it. The arm was so small in his hand. So delicate.

Suddenly he recoiled. What had he just been doing? Where would his mind have gone if allowed to continue? He tried to force the confused revulsion down out of sight. Right now, Grace was upset and she needed his guidance. "Your father hurt you, and my mother hurt me, and I don't think they get to call themselves 'mother' and 'father' if they do that. I think they lose the right. But that's not something to be upset about, because a person doesn't need a mother or father as long as they have someone who loves them. And we love you, Grace."

"You do?"

"Yes." *Or at least McConnell does. Me? I don't know what I feel, that's a question best left unanswered.* "And although bad thoughts can return and upset you every so often, they can't hurt you. Not really."

Grace looked assured, and the Mariner felt guilty. He'd fed her a pack of lies. Sure his mother couldn't hurt him, not physically, but the damage done to the boy then had turned him into the man, and the man saw to it he was hurt over and over again. Continuing her work.

"Grace?" he whispered.

"Yes?"

"I understand there is pain, but I want you to do something for me?"

"What?"

"Let me take it. I will take the blame, the hurt, the anger. I will tend that fire if it must be kept. You don't need to. And if you ever feel you are betraying the past by forgetting it,

then remember I'm honouring the memory for you. Let me take the blame."

"You can't do that."

"Yes. Yes I can." He allowed himself to touch her once more on the arm, ever so briefly, and the young girl seemed to brighten, ever so slightly. "Now, Miss O'Hara, let's get you to bed."

Each room was decorated with a simple bed, a small lantern, and a single grubby window behind thick iron bars. Outside the rain still poured down with a ferocity that made the Mariner feel rare gratitude for being on land.

He carried Grace up the stairs, stepping gingerly, afraid that at any moment he would slip and send them both back down, no doubt twisting their necks in the process. But his steps were true and once inside her room he laid the child upon her bed. Just as sleep claimed her eyes, he gave a her forehead a solitary kiss, bade her goodnight, and left.

He found Heidi waiting in the corridor. She was leaning against the banister, smiling a drunken grin and swaying to the gust of an alcoholic breeze.

"You're awfully sweet to that girl. Both of you are."

"She's had an awful life."

"Are you sweet to everyone who's had an awful life?"

"No." He began to grin back, just as drunk as she. "Just those to whom my devils take a liking."

"Ah yes, the Tasmanian devils. The devil-whisperer! The man who can make devils do as he says!"

“Well, I wouldn’t say that, but I did once get them to kill a rat, though I think they wanted to do that anyway. You should really call them the devils that can make a man go hungry.”

She laughed and wagged a finger at him. “There’s something very strange about you!”

He studied her face, high cheek-bones, piercing eyes and dainty chin. She really was very beautiful. “And you. You remind me of someone, though I don’t remember who.”

She took his hand in hers and led him up a second flight of stairs. “Let’s see if this jolts your memory.”

He followed in a drunken haze, stumbling as he stared at her hypnotic behind, lost in a sudden and powerful desire. At the top, outside her bedroom door, Heidi turned and pressed her lips to his. Despite the sour liquor, her mouth tasted sweet and inviting, and like a spooked horse, his lust reared, seizing all senses and directing them towards one goal.

They fell against her door, the thin wood shaking with the impact, whilst their hands clawed at each other’s clothes. He felt a stiff nipple greeting his hand through her shirt as he pawed hungrily, urgent in desire. Heidi too, just as needful of intimacy, pulled him close and arched her back, pushing her breast into his palm. Hooking his leg with hers she ground against him, causing him to groan into her open mouth.

Suddenly he pulled away, his eyes seeking hers. “I’m not sure if I’m ready for this,” he began, though his body eagerly betrayed the sentiment.

Heidi put a hand gently on the traitorous appendage. “It’s the end of the world, Arthur.” Her voice was serious and her

breath shallow. "What's left to wait for?"

With her other hand she deftly opened her bedroom door, kicking it wide with the heel of her boot, pulling him inside. He offered no resistance.

They undressed in a blur, plunged into darkness as the door was locked behind. The Mariner's befogged mind managed to register gratitude for that, he didn't want her to see his scarred body, a multitude of self-inflicted wounds both ancient and fresh.

"Come to me," she whispered, and he joined her on the bed, climbing atop whilst she wrapped the blanket around them. The material was far from comfy, its rough thread itched and scratched his back, yet with Heidi warm and soft beneath he drifted away from discomfort. Gone were his aches, his sore wounds, his tortured self-loathing, now there was just her and he, locked together as one.

Once again their lips pressed together, tongues dancing. She took his hand and guided it between her legs, groaning as he found the mark. Letting go of his wrist, now it had found its place, she clasped the back of his head and pulled him even tighter, raising her hips against his fingers.

He pulled her legs apart and gently entered her, moving together in time, united by their desire to escape their surroundings and go to the place only pleasure could take.

Everything's gonna be alright

She was whispering encouragement into his ear as they gained momentum, he felt the pleasure rising and suddenly he was lost, giddy from the alcohol, the sex and the bond.

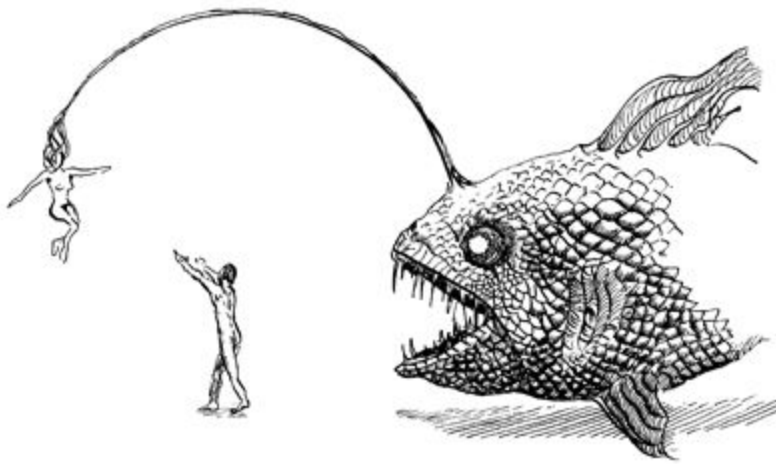
Reeling. Falling. He was speaking, words tumbling out, unstoppable. Something about love, but that wasn't all.

He said it again.

"I love you, Grace."

They froze. The world froze.

And a few seconds later, it all exploded.



36

THE FELLOWSHIP'S FUCKED

A RAT SCURRIED ACROSS THE room. It stopped a couple of feet from the body, its nose twitching, excitement drawing it forward, yet an instinctual scepticism kept it at bay. A corpse was a prize indeed for a scavenger, and the rat was clearly famished, yet its dark eyes looked upon the Mariner and thought twice. It backed away, haunches skidding on the wooden boards as it dashed beneath the bed, somewhere it could out-wait the food's guardian. Rats had patience, especially when a feast was at stake.

What a sight to wake to. A dead body sprawled out on the floor of the small bedroom, face upturned and bloody. There'd clearly been resistance; she'd fought him, or at the very least tried to escape, but death had rigged the contest from the start. He'd won in the end. Or some part of him had.

He tried to move, but couldn't. His body was caked in sick and blood, yet despite all the bodily fluids ejected, there was still enough alcohol within to keep him grounded. The demon drink had gotten the best of him again, and from the evidence sprawled on the floor before him, it seems this time the demon had shared its ward with another more deviant monster.

Outside the night sky had turned from black to grey. Dawn was coming, and soon they would find him. He knew he had to get up, get his things and escape, abscond with the supplies and weaponry onto the moors. For a moment he thought about simply heading to the Neptune and sailing away to the endless ocean where no-one could find him, but he knew he had no choice but find the Pope. That his monsters could come to the fore was a sign the truth was near. Truth within. Truth without.

The Mariner looked into her dead eyes and tried to remember just how he'd killed her. He could see the signs: the battered face, the bite marks, the semen smeared about her bloody crotch, and yet he remembered nothing of the process. The act was beyond him, lost in a fog of booze and destruction.

A cockroach, not as wily as the rat, scuttled towards the body and the Mariner lashed out, almost hitting it, sending it fleeing beyond his reach. There it stopped, calculating its next move. Man and insect sized each other, knowing each owns limitations and resigned to them. Eventually,

weakened by distress and loathing, he fell onto his back, unable to prop himself any longer. The cockroach had won.

Face against the boards, he looked once more into that of the corpse, eyes level with his.

You were supposed to take away the pain, they accused.

“I’ll take the blame,” he muttered. “Let me take the blame.”

Not enough. You lied to me. You didn’t take enough.

And then he finally understood, properly comprehending the girl that had kissed his cheek on a port an era ago, the child who’d been removed from a beast and placed into the hands of a monster.

Grace.

Raped.

Dead.

He screamed, long and hard until there was no more air in his lungs to expel. His voice broke, the sound not constant, but rising and falling wildly. It was the scream of a madman, the howling of a wounded wolf, enough to wake the dead, but not enough to wake Grace. She was beyond that now and could never return.

He found his knife in his pocket and drew it out, plunging it into his thigh. Blood bloomed around the wound, yet the pain barely registered. It would take more than a stabbing to pay for this. There was no coming back, no redemption, he’d taken a loan he could only default.

The door to Grace's bedroom flew open, smashing into a corner of the bed, sending small splinters showering through the air.

And now a second scream joined his, Heidi, her face white and horrified, hands clasped to her mouth. She saw the nightmare. The deed was witnessed. It was true.

Jolted by her presence, a memory surfaced, that of Heidi kicking him out her bedroom, calling him a pervert. She'd been vicious with her tongue, hissing accusations, yet now he wished she'd gone further. If only she'd attacked him, struck him, tied him with ropes and reported his desire to the others, then perhaps he wouldn't be laying here with a dead child at his feet? Perhaps then he'd still be able to take the pain away.

After his ejection he'd plundered the downstairs bar. Misery and self-loathing guiding him to oblivion. And then...? This.

Harris joined her side, his shotgun drawn ready for trouble, yet it was lowered, the owner in shock.

"Arthur?" he asked, voice trembling. "What have you done?"

But the Mariner was beyond answering. He just stared at the dead girl who'd given so much trust.

The eels knew, he thought as numbness crept through his mind. What did the Oracle call them? Ethusmanier? They knew what was going to happen, and I should have let them stop me.

Another door was opening, and footsteps thudding down the stairs. Heidi turned and dashed to the steps, grabbing McConnell as he rounded, soon enough to drag him to the ground, yet not enough to avoid the sight.

Now it was McConnell's turn to scream, and he did, the way only a man who realises he was wrong can.

Misjudged me eh? The Mariner's mind was giddy in its sorrow. Is this what you expected from your Jesus Haych Christ? Is it?

Harris raised his gun, so the barrel no longer pointed to the floor, but straight to the Mariner's head.

"Shoot him!" Heidi said, holding the wailing McConnell tightly, his tears soaking her nightshirt.

But Harris didn't shoot, his face was stiff with resolve. "Get up," he growled. When the Mariner failed to move, he commanded him to rise again, loud enough to match McConnell's screams.

The Mariner rose, body shaking with the effort and trauma, eyes wet with tears.

"Leave now. Go up onto the moors and wait there. I will send four men to meet you, that's all you're getting for this search of yours. Not because I think there's anything to this bullshit about islands and wasps, but because I want this Pope dead. And once he *is* dead, I don't want to ever see you again, got that?"

The Mariner didn't nod. There was no need to.

"Now go. Because I don't think I can control myself any longer."

With a juddering gasp, the Mariner turned to look at Grace's body. He wanted to apologise, to offer to carry her pain, but Harris was having none of it.

“Don’t look at her, you sick fuck! Get out! Now!”

Harris backed up, keeping the shotgun raised. The Mariner walked into the hallway, heading for the stairs, but McConnell’s voice stopped him first.

“I failed her, Arthur.”

“My name isn’t Arthur. She called me that, and she’s dead.”

Besides, Arthur was the good one. What was the other’s name? Traill? Yes, that sounds more like me.

“I thought there was good inside you.”

“You were wrong. And I told you what I was from the very beginning.”

“You’re a monster.”

“Yes.” It felt so terrible to acknowledge the truth. “I never pretended to be anything but.”

The Mariner walked down the stairs, eager to be out into fresh air, eager to be away from those that hated him, eager to put distance between him and that corpse, the mess that he had caused.

McConnell shouted from above, his voice gaining anger where once there’d only been shock. “I’ll kill you! I’ll find you, and I’ll kill you!”

Let him go Heidi. Let him go and have at me. Let’s put an end to it all now.

But another part of him was glad she was holding the reverend back. It sounded like he meant the threat, and the Mariner didn’t want to die. Not with the Pope so close.

Pain bit flesh and guilt whipped mind, the Mariner stumbled out into the grey morning, once again alone. He looked up, between the tightly packed buildings, towards the ascent. And beyond that, the moors.

It was time to find the Pope.

Carefully Harris selected the four he would send after the Mariner, putting them under the charge of Barnett, a man he could trust.

“Have you heard what happened?”

“Yes sir,” Barnett seemed just as shocked as everyone else.
“The sick fucker!”

“You’re going to have to put that aside for now, I want you to catch up with him and help find this Anomenemy.”

Barnett wrinkled up his nose in disgust and Harris waved his hand to halt any protest.

“I know, I know! I don’t like it either. But I think this man might be some sort of Anomenemy himself, and he’s going to lead you to this Pope character, and we can’t miss the opportunity to take out two with one stone.”

“Sir?”

“We’re going to return to the Beagle. Heidi and McConnell are too distracted to continue. Best we stream-line the mission, just you four and he. I’ll send a ship back for you, it’ll be here when you return.”

“How long will it take?”

Harris shrugged. However long it took.

“And you want us to kill the Anomenemy?”

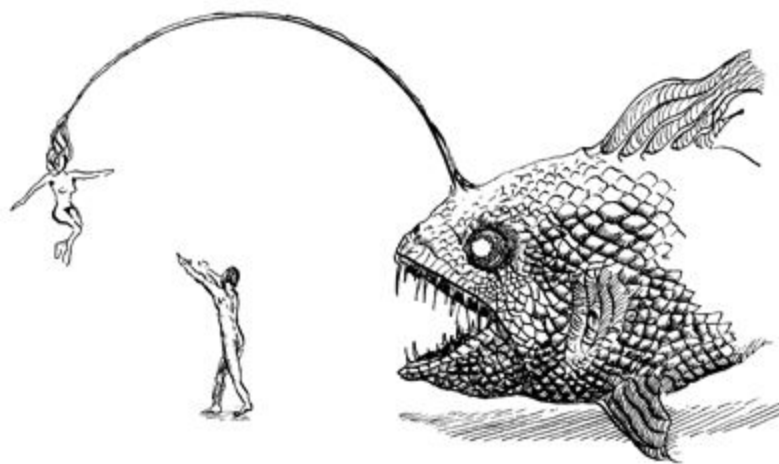
“Yes.”

“And what about the pervert?”

“Once you’ve got the Pope, kill him too.”

Barnett shook his head sadly. “It’s a fucked up world, isn’t it boss?”

“Yes,” Harris agreed. “Yes it is.”



37

HIS HOLINESS

[THE MARINER] WAS BACK ABOARD the Neptune, except the ship was no longer made of wood and metal, but neatly folded paper. Great strips of the stuff with enormous printed writing, as if a giant had gotten bored of his book and did some origami. Yet it was still his ship and he had a duty to man it. Except the paper hadn’t been treated! The pages

needed a coat of wax to glide through the water, and without it they were becoming soaked and limp, losing definition. The Neptune was sinking.

He rushed to and fro about the Neptune, replacing the failing hull with fresh strips, applying them like rolls of wall-paper. And yet as soon as one strip was applied, another would fail, water seeping through, their demise promising death in the cold depths.

Only leaping from the top deck into the sea would save him, he had to get clear of the ship before it sank, otherwise he'd be dragged down below by the vacuum. But he was afraid to show his face above, for there was an awful droning sound reverberating through to his ears. The Wasp had found him.

"I don't want to drown!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "I'm not ready to die!"

Everything's gonna be alright

"No! No it isn't! The Wasp is here! It has come for me!"

And yet the Wasp wouldn't have a chance to take him, because the walls were all soaked and closing in. The room was shrinking, the ceiling fat with moisture and leaking. Already the doorway above was sealed. There was no escape.

The wet paper closed over, his hands crushed by his side, immovable, his mouth blocked by the parchment, stifling all screams. And although the paper had looked wet and cold as it approached, now it was against his mouth it felt dry and soft, less like paper, more like pillow.

He was suffocating, trying to breathe, yet nothing could be forced through the barrier.

This was it, the last few moments of life.

Is that all?

Yes, the Wasp took everything else.

The Mariner awoke, desperately struggling to breathe, though in the waking world no barrier blocked his throat and air flooded inside, hurting his traumatised lungs with their sudden burst. He sat up, coughing and heart racing.

Barnett was watching him with the same mix of disgust and resentment that had painted his face for the past week. The rest of his crew, three others, were asleep around the small makeshift fire.

“Problems sleeping?” he said, making no attempt to disguise the sneer. The Mariner didn’t respond; he merely laid back down and stared into the darkness above. “I’d have problems too if I were you,” Barnett continued regardless. “I don’t think I’d ever sleep again.” There was some truth in that. He had always had trouble sleeping, often waking gasping and choking, but it was getting worse, more frequent. His past was catching up.

Barnett and his three other guards had joined with the Mariner just after he’d finished the long climb to the plateau, leaving the port behind, a tiny twinkling village in an otherwise grey landscape.

Once at the top, the view shocked him to his core. The moor was a vast land of dense scrub extending as far as he could see. It rose and fell in gentle hills, like solid waves. It felt like

a horrible mockery of the ocean, one where the water tore at your legs with every step, resisting rather than sliding aside.

Armed and grumbling. Barnett and his men had caught up. The Mariner wasn't surprised to find they were the ones who'd always seemed closest to Harris rather than Heidi. She wouldn't spare her finest. Not for the likes of him.

At first they looked about the great expanse, unsure of what direction to take. The land was enormous, dizzyingly so, how could they possibly find a single man out here? But then they noticed other figures ascending to the moors. It seemed as day began to break, the inns were emptying their patrons, and they all had the same goal in mind.

At least a hundred souls began to gather at the top of the path, readying backpacks stocked with supplies; folks of all ages, some gangs, others rough family groups. All keeping to themselves in small packs, yet staying near the main herd like fearful grazers.

And after what seemed like an hour or so, as the sun poked its head above the horizon, the crowd turned as one and began to strike out in a single direction. There was no head of the clan to give commands, and the Mariner knew better than to enquire how they'd come by the knowledge, so instead he and his four watchers kept their heads low and followed.

Of all that long journey, only one thing managed to distract him from the remorse that filled his heart. As the sunlight reached the heather, the dull grey plants that covered the plains suddenly lit up a bright purple. The crowd gazed, open mouthed at the beauty that reached to the horizon. Wonderment died away soon though, as a cold wind reminded them of the reality of their predicament, and

although the heather looked soft, in reality it proved a tough and spiteful plant.

Days came and went. The crowd plodded along, stopping during nightfall and huddling around a sporadic scattering of fires. Now it was the seventh morning he'd awoken, lungs painful, stomach screaming for alcohol and limbs shaking. Still, he welcomed the pain. It was less than he deserved.

Barnett, seeing his taunts were having little effect on the Mariner, gave up and settled himself. Soon he was surrounded by light snores, and although he tried to sleep, the dream lingered in his mind. Fear of choking kept him awake as the hours passed.

Eventually, as grey tinted the sky, a call went up from the other side of the camp.

“Gradelding! Gradelding!”

One of the families had been attacked and a child taken. There was no sign of the beast (whatever it was), just a small patch of torn clothing soaked in blood. He didn't ask the family about the incident, their glares told him to mind his own business.

From that moment on, the packs clung ever closer together, fires were built higher and no-one slept with their backs to the darkness. The Mariner overheard one of his guards asking Barnett how the land could go on so far, but Barnett merely shrugged, silencing him. It was a smart move, they needed to pretend they were one of these people, whoever they were.

“You should turn back, I don't know how long this is going to continue for,” he told Barnett in the days that followed. The large man looked like he was actually considering it too, his

face transforming for a rare moment to hope rather than loathing, until he finally shook his head. "No, we've got a job to do. You ain't going nowhere without us."

There were no other Gradelding attacks in the forthcoming days, though another predator seemed to be stalking them. Hunger. The five had run out of food. Barnett had supposed he'd beg another gang for supplies, but the Mariner put an end to that. If they appeared anything but prepared, it would look suspicious. Barnett reluctantly agreed, silently cursing the Mariner and promising himself that he would rob the whole gang of crazies once this madness was resolved.

And then, one night, the routine changed. Night fell but still no-one stopped. The herd kept moving, lighting torches to guide them across the marsh and scrub.

"We must be almost there," the Mariner observed, unable to hide his excitement despite the heavy exhaustion.

They were climbing a hill, rising up into darkness, yet near the summit, the air took on an orange hue. Fires illuminated the sky; there were others, confirmed as chatter rose above the wind, not loud enough to pick out words, but the tone was one of exhilaration, a crowd ready for a show. A drum beat from the shadows, slow as a heart.

"A bit fucking Wickerman-ish isn't it?"

The Mariner paid no attention to Barnett. He was beyond such frivolities; he would soon have the truth.

The hill rounded off onto a plateau, upon which a large crowd gathered, several hundred strong. It seemed their herd was one of many, all drawn across the moors to this central point. A strange spicy smell was in the air, incense burnt to honour the coming of their holy figure.

“So whatd’ya say? Shoot the fucker as soon as he shows himself?”

The Mariner gave Barnett a punishing look. “We hear what he has to say first. His words are important.”

They waited, anxious for something to happen, yet unwilling to call for it to do so. The Mariner felt his breath growing shallow. It was almost time, he could sense it.

And suddenly the drum began beating louder and the crowd fell into a hushed silence. The Mariner craned his neck, trying to see a cause for the reverence, yet couldn’t spot one, though he *could* hear a faint squeaking, becoming more prominent as time passed. As the sound increased, the crowd began to part, and into the firelight wheeled a cross, eight-feet tall and affixed to a cart. It was pushed by four robed followers, with a fifth leading the way, a great book clasped in his hands.

The Mariner felt his eyes drawn up in shock, for he saw the creature that could give him answers. The Pope.

The Pope was small, merely a dwarf. Its arms were pulled out left and right, tied to the wings of the cross with rope whilst it rested both feet on a small ledge jutting out of the trunk. Naked except for a jewel encrusted mitre, the dwarf looked hideous, its body dark and gnarled, twisted like a sick tree. Face, bloated in parts, showed little signs of life, yet its eyes glinted with malice, two angry stars in endless night.

Every man, woman and child fell to their knees, bowing to the presence as it came to a halt in the centre of the gathering.

“That *thing* is what you want to talk to?” Barnett whispered just loud enough for the Mariner to hear.

“The Oracle said he has answers. Said he woke the Wasp.”

The robed figure leading the procession raised his hand and the drumming stopped. “The Pope demands your silence!” He spoke loudly and clearly, his voice seeming to drift across the moor with ease, unperturbed by the harsh wind. “We gathered upon this vast land preserved against the destructive sea, to offer our love and obedience to the one true God – the Pope! Each of you have come here to meld your spirits, to give yourselves to his power. You blessed ones are the chosen few!”

The crowd murmured their pleasure, but one voice cried out, calling for attention.

“Who speaks?!” the robed man snapped.

“M-my n-name is Charlotte, your Holiness.”

The Mariner tensed, a sinking feeling in his gut.

“I fear there may be those amongst us who are not of the faith, nor of invitation.”

“Who?”

Sure enough, Charlotte, mother to the child taken by the Gradelding, pointed at the five men. Strangers who despite their best efforts had failed to avoid suspicion.

A space opened up around them, wary glances the only thing willing to bridge the gap. And then all eyes turned to the Pope, waiting for his decision.

The Pope licked his lips, not with greed, but like an old man trying to work a tired throat. “Strip them. Let’s see if they are loyal.”

The robed man raised his hands. "Come forward while you are judged. Leave your weapons where you stand. If you are sincere, you shall not need them."

The option to shoot and flee crossed the Mariner's mind, as it must have his companions', but such a course of action was doomed. They were outnumbered, too few bullets even if the cultists around them were unarmed. Best to stick with the deception and hope it wins through.

Dropping their guns, the five stepped forward, under a scrutiny that promised retribution.

"Just go with it, don't blink," the Mariner whispered to Barnett, the big man twitching from nerves.

The robed priest must have seen this and he pointed to Barnett first. "You! Take off your clothes. Stand naked before the Pope and be judged."

Barnett looked around, hoping for some sort of reprieve, or perhaps laughter as if it were all a prank, but no, they wanted him to strip on this cold hill in the middle of the night. But why? Was it a sign of submission? Were all these worshippers actually demons with hooved toes?

He slowly removed his clothes, starting with his coat, then shirt, trousers and undergarments. As each dropped to the ground, no doubt becoming quickly soiled in the damp mud, Barnett seemed to shrink, his confidence draining with every revealed limb. The cultists looked on like hungry dogs, dark grins growing wider with each scrap of skin.

Bare before them, Barnett did his best to draw himself up, to stand confidently despite the dwarf's searching gaze, yet still his legs trembled.

The Mariner watched, praying the bluff would work. *Come on, he's done as you asked.*

The Pope smiled, leathery cheeks folding. Barnett let out a relieved sigh.

With a dry voice the Pope made his judgement.

“Insincere.”

Fear overcame Barnett's final reserves. What had they been looking for? A tattoo? A brand? The man tried to back away, but it was too late, they came for him, men, women, even children surged forwards, hands grasping, fingers extended and gnarled. The proud follower of Mavis, killer of Anomenemies, tried to fight back, but his arms and legs were seized by the mass, struggles failing as if he were punching mud. They lifted and carried his body closer to the Pope, pushing him into the marsh before their idol so the filth flowed into his mouth, filling his airway with its cloying chill. Barnett bucked and twisted, but countless arms held him in place. Finally the struggling ceased, and Barnett was reduced to a piece of meat, food for whatever bugs waited in the scrub.

The executioners backed off, forming an eager audience behind their master, looking to the four men still awaiting judgement.

One bolted, simply turning to flee. It was a foolhardy move, he was shot before he even managed to turn.

“And then there were three,” the robed man announced, pointing to another to be brought forward.

Is this it? Is this how it's going to end? I'll be drowned after all, but not in the sea, which almost seems preferable now,

but drowned in mud, in filth, on a dark and horrible island. I'm so sorry Grace, I know this is what I deserve, but I'm scared. I don't want to die.

The soldier was asked to strip, and with barely stifled tears he unbuttoned his clothes. The Mariner chose not to watch. Instead he closed his eyes, intending to conjure an escape plan, but instead what came to mind was an image of him kneeling on a dock with a sad little girl by his side, remembering what it was like to have hope.

When they reopened, his companion was already being seized. He died as Barnett had before, wet darkness filling his lungs.

"I can't do this!" The Mariner's last companion was twisting where he stood, desperate to run but too terrified to move. Two wide and pleading eyes turned to the Mariner, but there was no comfort to be had there. The damned judged by the damned. It was inevitable.

"Please, please make them stop!" He spoke not to the Pope, but to the Mariner, as if he had some control over them, the Mariner could only watch as the man was dragged before the Pope. Once more the command to undress was issued, but the terrified accused remained still, too fearful to operate his fingers.

His insincerity was all too clear.

And finally the Mariner was once again alone. Three bodies lay in front, one behind, each as dead as the next, and all about him were the Pope's loyal followers, eager to see the final interloper slain.

"Step forward and remove your sinful lies!"

This was it, his final moment. If he still held his gun, he would put a bullet through the head of as many as he could before they dragged him to the ground, but the Mauser lay in the mud some distance back. All streams had run dry. This was the end.

He walked forward, standing in the same cursed patch of bramble as the others. The Pope's decrepit chest rose and fell with anticipation. "All I want is the truth," he said, loud enough for the Pope and his closest servants to hear, but the Pope was not swayed.

"Disrobe!"

The word echoed out across the slopes like a funeral toll, and although the Mariner's fingers were numb and shaking, they did as they were commanded. He'd seen what happened if you failed to comply, your end came that bit faster.

Already the crowd were inching closer, eager to put to death the last of their intruders. They didn't grasp him, unwilling as they were to anger the Pope, yet still they prepared to seize him the moment judgement was passed, as passed it would surely be.

The Mariner removed his shirt and dropped it to the ground.

And the crowd froze.

"Halt!" the robed man commanded and the Mariner stopped, unsure of the delay but grateful for it. "Turn around."

The Mariner very slowly rotated where he stood, his body scrutinised by all those near. The Pope himself twisted on his crucifix, trying to see clearer.

It was his self-mutilation that held them captivated. Countless white, red and grey lines crossed his flesh in a myriad of punishments, both recent and old; the Mariner's sins made real. The evidence of his methods of self-control, exposed for all. The façade of normality lying in the mud.

The Pope's face crumpled like a deflated football in what was surely a satisfied grin. "Sincere," he proclaimed, and the crowd relented, resolved to their master's decision. The head priest however, was still suspicious.

"Why did you travel with non-believers?" he asked, and although the Mariner couldn't see his face, he could feel the man's questioning eyes boring through his skull.

"I only met them at the edge of the moors," he lied. "We decided to travel together encase of Gradelding attacks."

The robed man turned to the woman who'd first outed them. "Is this true?"

Charlotte, suddenly afraid to be put in such a precarious position, played it safe, though it was clear she didn't trust the Mariner one bit. "Yes, that's correct. I saw him haggling with them as we left town." This was untrue, the woman and her family hadn't arrived till much later, long after Barnett had caught up, but the lie was safe enough.

"Then it is settled," he said, and then, throwing his arms into the air, gave a holy command to the congregation. "Let the cleansing begin!"

Drums began beating, first slowly, then wildly, building up tempo. All about him, the crowd began to disrobe, shaking off their coats and blankets that had previously been keeping out the chill. Pale bodies revealed themselves in the dim firelight, but to his surprise each body was like his own,

riddled with scars. Some were identical to his, hundreds of tiny cuts clustered around secret places hidden from prying eyes. Others had used fire or boiling water to scorch their flesh, great swaths of skin smooth and without blemish.

And once exposed to the elements, the worshippers began inflicting fresh wounds upon themselves. Some used knives, some used whips, some simply held their limbs into the fires that were growing larger by the minute, fuelled by the discarded garments. Those that could not harm themselves, the children and infirm, were assisted with perverse care by their elders, who caused wounds with a care usually reserved for binding them.

The Pope watched the flagellation with a mixture of pride and ecstasy on his ancient features. So wrapped up in the scene a long trail of drool hung from his lips. His robed servants began once more to push the crucifix about through the carnage, incense creating a thick fog through which he looked as a god.

Already eyes, still suspicious from before, were beginning to look in the Mariner's direction. Charlotte, who'd seemed just another nervous mother before, but now pushing pins through the flesh of her thigh, kept glancing in his direction, waiting for him to join them in their peculiar worship.

He had no qualms about self-harm, he had done it countless times before, sometimes quite savagely, but this was different. These people weren't using self-harm to control their demons, but to *unleash* them. What would happen to him if he did the same?

The robed man, the Pope's mouthpiece, was strolling through the crowd, going from tortured soul to tortured soul. As he did he would watch their agony for a few moments,

then take their chin and angle their face to look inside his hood. This would only last a few seconds, but in that time the cultist would relax, as if some internal blissful release had occurred, and then the robed man would move onto the next.

Panic. The robed man was heading the Mariner's way, ready to study him as he had the others. He thought about fleeing to another section of the midnight mass, but caught Charlotte's eye. In that single glance he knew any suspicious activity would raise alarm.

With little choice he turned to the nearest fire. Stretching out his left arm he began to inch towards it, slowly growing hotter with every step. The flames danced invitingly, seemingly excited by the offer of flesh to grill.

A nervous glance told him the painful truth, Charlotte was watching and wouldn't stop till she saw him burn. Already the skin on his hand was begin to boil, sweat breaking out in huge beads to lessen the painful heat. He had to continue. He must! Just a bit further...

"Is there a problem, my son?"

The Mariner turned to look into the face of the robed man. Beneath the hood was a rather normal looking gentleman, later in years, with a round spectacled face. There was something comforting about his eyes, soft yet piercing, and he wondered why a man would hide such a friendly visage beneath a cloak.

"No problem," the Mariner said, though he used the opportunity to withdraw his hand. "No problem at all."

The robed man's eyes searched the Mariner's face, and gentle confusion seeped in, as if the Mariner was a

particularly troublesome crossword puzzle. "Is this your first visit to the Pope? You seem... familiar somehow."

"I do?" the Mariner was lost in the robed man's eyes, and rubbed his sore left hand absent-mindedly. "I need to speak to the Pope. It's important."

"The Pope doesn't speak directly to his flock. You should know this."

"And yet I must. I need answers."

"Answers?" the robed man chuckled, but the act seemed like an illusion, there was concern in those calming orbs. "And you think the Pope has the answers you require?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think this? You're not one of us, I can see that. You don't believe in him as the others do. So why do you think he can bring you peace?"

Drawn ever on by the robed man's warmth, the Mariner confessed his purpose. "Since the earliest I can remember I've been searching, looking for the truth. And I've always known the truth would be found on an island, ringed with almost impenetrable defences, somewhere in the endless ocean. The Pope can help me find that island. He can help me find the truth."

"The truth..." The robed man's eyes suddenly shifted, shock seeping in. "It's you! I didn't think I'd ever see you again and you've changed so much I didn't recognise.... No wonder there's no name in there! No wonder I couldn't see it!" He chuckled, shaking his head as if it were all a joke. "This isn't the island you're looking for, and the Pope can't point you to it."

“How could you know this?”

“Because I *am* the Pope! That gnome up there is my prop, my mask, my wizard before the curtain. And I can assure you, I know the truth. If you have questions, you should ask them of me.”

Almost overcome with relief and excitement, the Mariner babbled like a lunatic. “What’s happened to the world? Is a demon devouring it? Has God punished it? Are Anomenemies dissolving it? Where is the island I’m looking for? Why is it lodged in my head, when nothing else remains?” He gasped for breath, shaking from the promise of answers after so long a search. “Please, you have to tell me the truth!”

The Pope looked deep into the Mariner’s eyes, and suddenly the Mariner realised that what kindness he’d seen had been purely an act, just as a cat might pretend to be playing with the mouse just before it bites down. A cruel amusement and a predatory smile.

The Pope spoke with words that echoed deep into the Mariner’s grotesque psyche, and brought his fragile world crashing down with a simple few words.

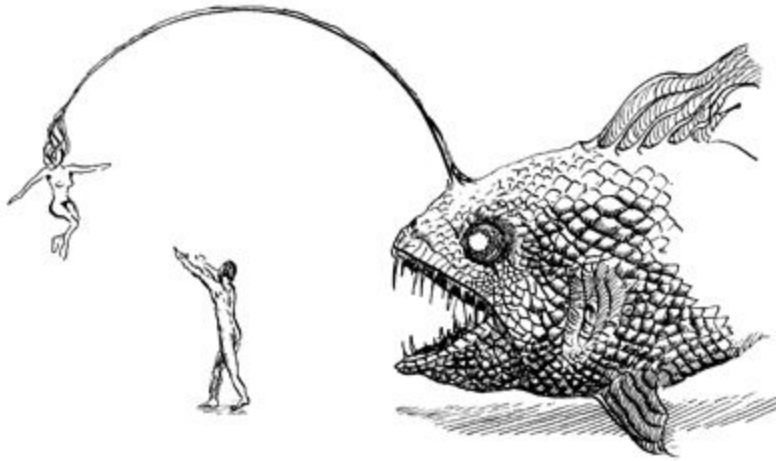
“There is no truth,” he said. “Only the Wasp.”

PART IV

THE WASP

There is no truth. Only the Wasp.





38

CHRISTOPHER McCONNELL WAKES UP

_____ yet still
the blood wouldn't clear.

Vzzzzzzzzz.

What? *Why* wouldn't the blood clear? And clear what? The thought had been with him, but where was it now?

Christopher McConnell blinked as the hot substance dripped from his forehead and continued to seep into his eyes. Where was he? What was going on?

As abrupt as his consciousness, his seat lurched as if in the grip of an earthquake. An object in his hand slithered like a muscular snake. Terrified, he recoiled from it, screaming,

desperate to get a grip on the situation, and forced his eyes open. The world was blurry, yet through the red mess clogging his lids he could make out a landscape hurtling closer.

He was driving! He was in his old second-hand ford, why hadn't he known that before? The object in his hands was the wheel, turning uncontrollably as he careered off the road. No time to try to make sense of the situation, first he had to avoid the _____

_____ but all that echoed back was the sound of his own voice, terrified and childlike in its shrill terror.

The car was still. What just happened? Had he crashed? The front of the car was embedded in a small wall and the engine had stalled, but the bonnet didn't look too badly damaged. The seatbelt bit into his chest, but apart from his head wound he felt fine.

His head! That's what he'd been thinking about before. He had done something to get the blood out of his eyes. McConnell looked down and saw a dark red smear along his sleeve. He'd come-round mid-thought, as if awaking from a dream, and the thought had been about clearing his eyes. So it *couldn't* have been a dream? Amnesia then? Or a brain aneurysm? He suddenly wished he'd watched more medical dramas on TV, or even better *studied* medicine! Perhaps then he might have a clue as to what was going on, and how he'd got here.

'Here' was a sparse wood divided by a long straight road. To each side was a small stone wall, age weakened enough to crumble at first contact with his car, offering nothing but a stalled engine as comeuppance.

The landscape seemed familiar in make-up, but not from any direct memory. The trees were evergreen... he supposed. McConnell had never been good at identifying flora and fauna, let alone determining his locale by them. In fact, McConnell had never been much good at anything, other than operating video cameras. For three years he'd practised this single skill in gainful employment for the BBC recording 'Old To Gold', a direct copy of a thousand other shows searching through peoples junk to find items that might fetch twenty quid at auction. The show lasted three long years before getting shut down for appalling ratings (and in a daytime slot, ratings could be pretty dreadful before being considered a liability). Suddenly his career as a cameraman came to a crushing halt. Dreams of working alongside great directors such as Raimi or Spate were thrown in the trash, right alongside with his Clapham flat and decadent lifestyle. Not that he'd been paid much for the antiques show, but everyone was in debt these days. Or at least they had been, until the damn credit crunch wotsit, when all of a sudden stores no longer offered you credit cards and his credit cards no longer worked in stores.

McConnell would have ended up on the scrap-heap, if not for a producer he'd worked with in year one of Old To Gold, since left for greener pastures. He was starting up a new show, a sort of funky documentary series called 'Gibberish' and it needed a researcher. Pretty low pay, but it was something. Actually, it turned out to be a lot of fun. It mocked groups and businesses that took advantage of the ignorant - alternative medicines, psychics, that sort of thing. Although the biggest targets were the organised religions,

anything ranging from Islam to Scientology. The approach led to some pretty harsh reviews, but *great* ratings.

His father, a life-long Catholic, hadn't been impressed. All his fears about his son joining the liberal media had been proven right, and when McConnell tried to move back into the family home (empty other than his father these past five years since Mum passed away) the old man had refused. Home or the job. McConnell chose the job, and moved into a bedsit.

He'd been on the way to collect some things, temporarily still under the old bastard's roof when... what? Suddenly he was here, in this strange forest behind the wheels of his car. A car he'd been hoping to sell, though the crash may have put an end to that dream.

"Fuck," he cursed, wincing at the pain in his face as he did. Perhaps he'd been attacked and drugged? Perhaps he'd had a flashback? He didn't think he'd taken enough acid in his youth to worry about such things, but who could tell? There wasn't enough research on the subject to be sure. Perhaps his brain had been fried and he'd zoned out for weeks?

A sign ahead caught his eye. He squinted, not making it out, so he rubbed his eyes.

Deggendorf 10

"What the fuck?" He shook his head. The name sounded German, but he'd never been to Germany before. If he'd been spiked, or drunk, or hallucinating, how did he cross the channel?

McConnell rubbed his head. The strange fizzing sensation was passing, his brain recovering from whatever blow had broken his skin.

A groan from the back seat made him shriek, jumping where he sat and smacking his head against the side window, leaving a circular print of sticky blood upon impact.

His father was in the backseat. Gregory McConnell, looking many years beyond his sixty-seven, was slumped in the rear-opposite side, belted in and semi-conscious.

“Dad?” McConnell asked, not believing his own eyes. “Dad, what’s going on?”

And then the ground began to shake.

It began as a low trembling, something felt in fillings that could be dismissed, but as it built up, the trees on either side began to quiver.

“Dad!” he yelled again, turning the key in the ignition to breathe life into the old ford, but with no avail.

Water seeped across the road. Not much, only an inch deep, but it flowed through the trees to his right in one wide wave. His panic stricken mind screamed tsunami, but could a tsunami hit Germany? How much of Germany was coast? Was he even in fucking Deutschland? With a moment’s reflection he figured it must be a flood from nearby river, burst from its banks, but this did nothing to allay his fears. He tried the ignition again and reluctantly the car rumbled into life.

The sound of the engine must have roused his father, who now leaned forward, staring over McConnell’s shoulder. “Sighisoara. Take me home. Please, take me home.”

“What?” McConnell put the car into reverse and de-tangled it from the fragmented wall. The car bounced over scattered

stones as it rolled to realign itself with the road. "Your home is Croydon. Where's this other place?"

"Sighisoara."

"Dad, you're confused, just be quiet for a second... How did we get here? Do you know what's going on?"

"Take me home. Sighisoara."

"I don't know where the fuck that is!"

"Transylvania."

Shaking his head, McConnell began to drive towards Deggendorf for no other reason than because the water was running from the opposite direction. He glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw his father had fallen into a semi-conscious state. It was probably for the best, the old man was speaking gibberish.

As he drove, a thick mist rolled in as if brought by an ocean breeze, settling on the windscreen and forcing McConnell to switch on the wipers despite the absence of rain. He was eager to make haste, water still flowed around his tires with a hunger that made him nervous, but the low-visibility was an even greater threat. It would be hard to see head-on traffic in this mist. Perhaps it was an oncoming vehicle that made him lose control in the first place?

Suddenly, realising his mistake, he veered into the right hand lane. He'd been driving on the left! If this was Germany, surely he should be on the right? How long had he been breaking the law?

"Fuckfuckfuck," he hissed through gritted teeth, heart beating with heavy ominous thuds, two thuds to every swipe

of the windscreen.

Thud-thud. Swish. Thud-thud. Swish.

"Where are you taking me?" his father asked, his voice thin and exhausted.

"Dad, it's okay," McConnell said, trying to pacify his father. "I'm going to find a way back to Croydon."

Thud-thud. Swish. Thud-thud. Swish.

"Croydon?"

"Yes. Somehow we've ended up in Germany. We're not in England any-more."

"I don't want to go to England!" the old man yelled as stubborn as a toddler. "Take me home!"

"England *is* home you senile old fool!" McConnell found himself shouting at his father, frustrated, stressed and scared out of his wits. "Shut up, and let me drive!"

"England? My home? Don't be silly, that's where Pappa's from, but I don't want to go there. And you shouldn't address a stranger so."

"A stranger? What are you talking about? I'm your son, you silly git! Christopher! Remember? Christopher!"

The old man fell silent and immediately McConnell felt guilty. Whatever had happened to bring him here had also happened to his father, the shock clearly having a devastating impact. He was probably suffering amnesia or a stroke or some other awful thing.

"Listen, Dad.. I'm sorry, it's just-"

Suddenly he felt fingers at his head, scratching and clawing. One got a hold of an ear and pulled, a strange deep tearing sound followed by pain as blood poured from the broken lobe. He pulled away, leaning forward, trying not to swerve off the road, whilst getting away from the sudden onslaught. Behind him his father was screaming, not words, just mindless babble, hollering as if he were a dog after the postman. Insanely, McConnell's disturbed mind assumed it was over-the-top retribution for his brisk tone and crude language (something his father had always condemned); he even tried to yell an apology, but when he turned his head to face his attacker he saw how futile an apology was.

Gregory was tangled in his seatbelt, held back by the strap as he strained against it with all his will. His face, usually one of condescending calm and judgement, was now distorted into a wide snarl, spittle peppering his chin, cheeks an angry red, as if he'd consumed a lifetime of alcohol in just five minutes. Loud screams were cut short as the belt constricted his neck, choking breath. Once more he appeared like a dog, though this time straining against its leash and gasping, not intelligent enough to let the lead go slack.

"Dad, stop it!" He glanced between the road and the passenger as quickly as he could. "What's wrong? Tell me what's wrong!"

The creature's eyes had rolled up into its skull like tiny white dots of pus on an enormous purple boil. As McConnell screamed, Gregory turned a bloodshot eye in his direction. It almost made him open the door and throw himself onto the tarmac outside; the hate he felt was potent.

"I'm your son, Dad! Don't you remember?" Tears of anguish flooded down his face. "What about Mum? Remember her?"

But Gregory wasn't interested in reminiscing. He thrashed like a trapped beast, throwing his body forward until the strap cut into his skin, drawing blood.

Unable to look at his disturbed father anymore, McConnell turned to the road. What could he do? Find a doctor? In Germany? It didn't seem likely. Perhaps he could find a hospital or police station and throw himself at their mercy? Did they need passports? Wasn't there some sort of EU medical card you need in situations like this?

If only this fucking mist would pass!

The TV Researcher from Croydon let out a loud desperate sob. He was leaning so far forward he could feel the steering wheel digging into his chest, and yet still couldn't see a damn thing outside. And all the while his father was snarling and shrieking.

"I'll do what you want, just please come back," he whimpered. "I'll take you to Ziggy-wara if you like. Would you like that? To visit Ziggy-wara?"

With a gurgle the screeching suddenly ceased. McConnell wanted to look, but was too scared to witness again those hate-filled eyes and horrible snarl.

But it was the quiet, gentlemanly voice of Gregory McConnell that reached his badly torn ear.

"I think you'll find, young man, it's pronounced Zig-ish-warah."

They never found Deggendorf. The forest gave way to vast unkempt fields which in turn surrendered to a sporadic collection of hamlets. Nothing that could be called a town.

Eventually the rickety car broke free from the thinning mist, although their vaporous pursuer never fully vanished beyond the horizon, it clung to the ever changing line, refusing to give up the hunt.

“You’re going to love Sighisoara,” Gregory said, looking out the window as if he were on a pleasant excursion. “It’s a beautiful medieval town, one of the most significant in Transylvania’s history. Ancient stone houses. Majestic church atop of a central hill. Ah! I can picture it now. I grew up there, you see, before my father insisted we move away. Was dangerous for an Englishman to live in Romania in those days. It was a terrible blow to my mother though, she’d lived there her whole life.”

“I didn’t know you’d actually lived in Romania,” McConnell said. Gregory had mentioned, some years ago, that his Grandmother had been Romanian, but had never elaborated further.

“Why would you? We don’t normally share such things with our drivers, but seeing as how you’re going to take me there, I thought you deserved an explanation. What’s your name?”

“Christopher,” McConnell muttered, deeply worried about state of his father’s mind.

“A fine name. You’ll enjoy Sighisoara, many beautiful young women there, we’ll have the time of our lives! You won’t regret it.”

He doesn’t realise how old he is, McConnell marvelled. He’s regressed to an earlier segment of life. No wonder he has no clue who I am!

“It might be difficult to cross the border, with politics being as they are, but we’ll find a way. My father was resourceful,

and so am I. Have you ever driven to Romania?”

“No. And certainly not from Germany.”

“What do you mean Germany?” Gregory laughed. “We’re on the outskirts of Prague, look!”

Ahead, the fields suddenly ended and a city began as if the two landscapes had been hastily sewn together. In the distance he could make out a hill straddled by an enormous castle, a beautiful forest of ornate turrets in the foreground.

“It’s gorgeous,” he remarked, stunned by the old-worldliness of the Czech capital. Through the centre ran a river, snaking in an enormous question-mark, but as it left the city, it flowed through fields, ending the defined route and spilling into a quagmire.

“Shouldn’t a river continue? I mean, if it’s as established up there,” he said, gesturing to the bridges ahead, “shouldn’t it be just as defined out here?”

“I don’t know,” Gregory said. “When I was last here there weren’t fields like this for miles.”

“Hang on,” McConnell said as he applied the brakes. “There’s someone up ahead, let’s have a word.”

A gentleman was wandering beside the road, looking baffled and thoroughly lost. As the car approached he began waving his arms, gesturing for them to stop. Pulling up beside him and winding down his window, McConnell’s heart sank as he realised the man was speaking a language he couldn’t.

He spoke slowly, shaking his head. “English? Do you speak Eng-lish?” The man continued his gibberish, but now

produced a leaflet to support his nonsense claims. "What's that?"

"Ho-Tell!" the man managed to say, nodding his head emphatically with each syllable.

"We don't know Prague, I'm sorry." He put the car in gear ready to pull away. This man wasn't going to be any help, he needed a local.

"Ho-Tell! Weyer Ho-Tell?"

"I. Don't. Know. P-" His words died in his mouth. The leaflet the gentleman waved like a map proudly displayed a hotel called the Chesterford, Oxford Street.

London.

McConnell put his foot on the accelerator and sped off, leaving the man yelling and waving his little advert in the air. Rather than give reassurance, the interaction had left McConnell even more disturbed.

"Isn't Prague a long way from Germany?"

His father, always more worldly than he, thought for a moment. "A few hours, yes."

"It's only been thirty minutes! At the most!"

"My goodness, you do drive fast."

"I haven't been driving f-" he stopped his protest. No need to worry the old sod, he was confused enough.

The tarmac road immediately transformed into cobbled streets as they traversed the fields into the densely packed town. Passing into shadow made McConnell slow to a

hesitant crawl, worried he might hit a pedestrian, but as they glided through the streets, not a single figure could be seen. Not a soul.

A tap on his shoulder made him jump. He'd still been leaning forward, out of reach by his father since his strange outburst, and the sudden contact made him feel under attack. Swinging round in his seat, it was kind concern rather than hate waiting for him. Momentary panic registered that his father had been able to reach forward; what if he had another spell like before? Then he realised it was precisely because he'd leaned forward *calmly* that he'd been able to. The belt restricted in response to sudden jolts, nothing else.

"Are you comfortable Christopher? Your ear looks terribly hurt."

"Oh? Er... yes it's fine."

"Are you sure? How on earth did you do that?"

McConnell glanced in the mirror. His ear did look terrible; the flesh was torn on both the top and bottom of the join, making the whole thing lean out further than the other. It would look absurd, if not for the mass of dried blood caked around it.

"I fell down," he lied. Or had he? The head wound he'd sustained was not a careful cut, but a deep scrape as if he'd fallen amongst gravel. Was this all a delusion, conjured as he lay in the dirt, waiting for someone to treat his broken skull?

"We need to cross the Charles Bridge. Take a right here."

They turned towards a large stone arch, the bridge behind clearly seen rising up over the river below, proud and stern. On either side, decorating the crossing, were statues of saints, silently offering prayers. McConnell hoped they would pray for him, though only in that desperate half-hearted way atheists did when stuck in a jam.

“How things change,” Gregory mused as they began rolling over the bridge, looking out over the water to the rest of the city, the Church of Our Lady boldly rising above the rest.

McConnell, who also took the opportunity to gaze at his surroundings, noticed a small crowd gathered on the other end, walking in their direction. “Finally, some locals!”

“I hope you’ve got your papers in order,” his father warned. “They could be communists.”

“All in order,” he said, humouring his father. Unbeknownst to Gregory, the Iron Curtain had fallen long ago.

They rumbled forward, and in return the figures ahead began to jog, closing the gap between. “It’s all right,” he muttered to no one, shaking his head. “I’m on my way to you, just wait there.”

But the locals didn’t wait. Instead the jog turned into a run.

“What’s wrong with them?” Gregory sat up in alarm, and McConnell saw why. The people running towards them looked more like looters than locals. Each was bellowing with rage, screaming at the vehicle. Most stretched out their hands, ready to swipe with fists, but the one in front held a golf club, iron head aloft.

McConnell recognised the looks on their faces.

He reached down and wrenched the still moving car into reverse, the gear box screaming in protest. It resorted to its final defence, stalling and going silent as the vehicle jolted to a halt.

“Oh shit!”

“Christopher,” Gregory warned. “What do they want with us? *Christopher!*”

McConnell got the car back to life, just as the golf-club shattered a side window. Gregory ducked down, hiding from the flying glass, whilst his son tried to withdraw them from the onslaught. The car rumbled back, groaning loudly, but by then the rest of the gang were upon them, kicking and screaming at the fragile protective shell. The club came down a second time, failing to break the windscreen, but sending a multitude of small cracks spiralling away from the point of impact.

“Go! Go! Go!” he screamed as the car picked up speed, reversing down the bridge, leaving the saints to the sinners. “Faster you fuck! Faster!” he yelled at the car as the engine gave a miserable wail.

And then they were away, breaking free from the mindless locals who bellowed in rage, maintaining their pursuit until out of sight.

Backtracking out of town, McConnell didn’t risk slowing to turn around. He reversed the whole way.

After the disaster of Prague, the two men lapsed into silent contemplation. McConnell continued to drive east, or at least the best guess of east he could make. They stuck to rural roads, whenever they saw a built up area ahead, they

would about-face and find an alternative route. Sometimes they would see figures wandering in the distance, but chose to keep a wide berth.

It was becoming increasingly impossible to deny, to both man and father, that something was inherently amiss.

“Christopher?” his father spoke in a weak voice.

“Yes?”

“Are you a religious man?”

His heart sank. Not this. Not now. Of all the conversations he’d had with his father over the years, this was one he didn’t want to repeat.

“Not really no.”

“I see,” his father nodded, understanding. Perhaps this time, with him thinking that they were strangers rather than blood relations, it would be easier? “I believe in Jesus Christ. I remember, when I was a boy, being as sceptical as you, but as you get on in years you see things you can’t explain.”

“Like this?”

“Yes,” he nodded solemnly. “Like this. Jesus Christ... or is it Jesus H Christ? I don’t quite remember. Christ was born on a cross. No, no, that’s not right. Oh dear me, the scare back there had got me all in a muddle.”

“Dad,” he said, forgetting and allowing the lie to lapse, “Jesus Christ wasn’t born on a cross, he was-”

McConnell realised he didn’t remember either. He was sure it was obvious, but there was just a big dark hole in his mind

where the information once lay. Shaking his head, he put the query aside. There was something uncomfortable about confronting lost memories. Something dangerous about trying to retrieve them.

“Well, wherever he was born, what’s he got to do with our current problem? No offence, but Jesus ain’t here to help us find home is he?”

“No he’s not, because we’re being punished. That’s what’s going on.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Look around you, Christopher! The land is broken, bits missing. Prague never looked like that! People don’t act like wild beasts! It’s the End of Days.”

“Sure.” McConnell wanted the old man to stop talking. These were thoughts best avoided.

“The world has been shattered, Christopher, and that’s all there is to it.”

The Shattering. Naming the process they were living through, would prove to be the final act Gregory McConnell knowingly made on earth. After giving his prognosis the elderly man dropped into quiet contemplation, seemingly resolved to their fate. And not long after that, he began to growl.

McConnell, straining to keep his concentration on the road, knew he should look behind, but couldn’t bring himself to muster the will. Instead he leaned forward in his seat, putting at much space as possible between him and his father.

He had no proof, but he could swear he could feel corrosive hate on the back of his neck.

And suddenly the car was once more consumed in screams of fury as his father threw himself forward against the restraints, spitting and clawing at the front seats, tearing the material in his eagerness to harm his son.

McConnell didn't look.

"You'll be okay soon Dad," he whispered, trying to blot out the awful sound. "Just you wait. You'll be okay"

But time slipped past, and although the snarls rose and fell in volume and energy, they did not cease. Eventually, just as the fuel dial begun to sneak into the red, McConnell saw a sign beside the road.

Sighisoara 7

He pulled over, and as slowly and delicately as he could, turned around.

Gregory McConnell's face was bloody. How he'd managed to hurt himself so viciously, McConnell couldn't tell, but his guess was that in his attempts to escape from bondage he'd ended up clawing at his own skin. The buckle, with its big red release button, remained at his side, ignored and forgotten.

A slight tap and he'd have been free, a part of him morbidly imagined, though another part cruelly added, it could still happen.

"Dad," he began carefully, meeting the creature's furious glare. "We're almost there. You wanted to go to Sighisoara and I've taken you there. Do you remember? Sighisoara?"

The zombie-like monster that wore the mangled disguise of his father snarled back and threw itself forward. McConnell was drained of tears, instead his eyes just throbbed.

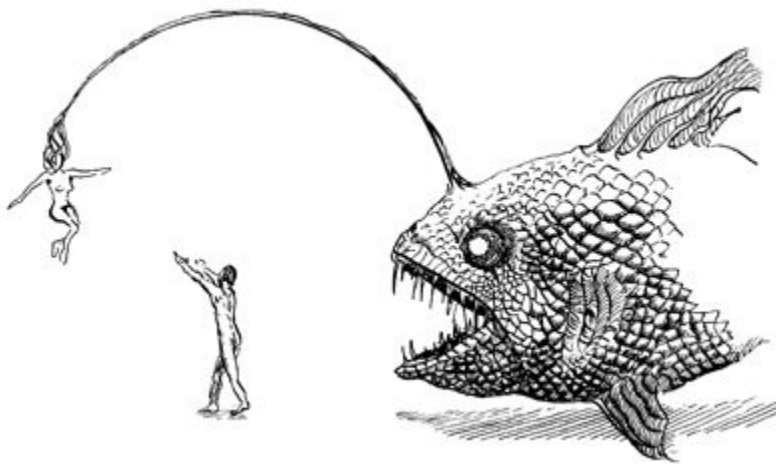
“Last time, Sighisoara brought you back. Can you try that now? Sighisoara? You grew up there. Sighisoara.”

But what had worked before now failed, and the creature continued to thrash about in the back-seat. Trembling, McConnell started the car and began the final stretch to the town his father had once remembered so fondly.

And as he drove he kept whispering over and over like a prayer, “Sighisoara. Try to remember Sighisoara.”

The car ran out of petrol just as the vehicle rolled into town. McConnell looked at it in wonder, a hill surrounded by medieval turrets, a mighty clock-tower, and a beautiful decaying church at the highest peak.

It was just as he'd imagined.



SIGHISOARA. TRY TO REMEMBER SIGHISOARA.

McConnell sat beside the body of Grace, a bedding sheet gently laid over her body. It seemed wrong to wrap her in such claustrophobic surroundings, but the ruin that remained was something he simply couldn't look at. He didn't know how to proceed; should he notify someone? Was there law in this small town? He doubted it. Leaning over, he caressed the bump in the shroud that was her head, delicate tears wetting his lashes.

Amidst him, the rest of the inn was in uproar. The landlady held Harris and Heidi responsible for the murder, though the gravitas of the situation seemed to be limited to concern for stains. A greater source of fury was the raided cellar, significantly drained by the Mariner before his heinous crime. The captains were busy buying her off whilst simultaneously arguing about Harris' decision to allow the Mariner to leave.

How had he not seen this coming? The Mariner, Arthur-*fucking*-Philip (or whatever he called himself now) had appeared like a lunatic since day one, so why had he trusted him?

Because you were mistaken, that's why. Because of that bullshit you allowed yourself to believe. That bullshit that made you think he was special. That she was special.

But he'd been proven wrong. Grace wasn't special, she was dead. And the Mariner her rapist.

Perhaps he'd been wrong from the start? If he was wrong about the Mariner, perhaps he was wrong about the whole thing? Perhaps his Dad's final thought had been nothing but nonsense, the confused babbling of a mind slowly taking wing of its fleshy nest?

What do you know? What do you know for certain?

He knew that somehow Grace and the Mariner had brought the zoo back, and they did so by remembering. Later, the Mariner had pretended he'd played no part, but he'd heard him say 'I remember', *he'd heard it*. And just after, the island drew itself upon the horizon like a stripper from a cake. If *they* weren't special, perhaps what they had *done* was?

"I should not have let you leave Sighisoara," he said, still stroking her hidden hair. "It was just a zoo, not a home. And we were fools, not fathers."

After another few minutes, long enough for dawn to properly break and cast its glow directly through the window, McConnell had decided what needed to be done. He knelt, drawing away the cloth to once more look upon the child's face. In death, he'd hoped she'd look serene, but there was no glimmer of comfort to have in that poor beaten face. Only misery and regret. He leaned down and planted a single solitary kiss upon her forehead.

"Goodbye, Grace O'Hara," he whispered.

And that was that.

Downstairs, Harris and Heidi were still arguing, having placated the landlady with more supplies as payment for the plundered booze. McConnell approached them, unnoticed whilst they yelled.

"They're probably not far ahead, we can still catch him!" Heidi was saying.

"And what then?" Harris snapped. "Follow him all the way until we find the Pope? Let's face it, you would kill him, I

would kill him, probably that timid bugger upstairs would even have a go. This way we get both the Pope and Philip. Barnett's professional, he'll see to it, I promise you."

"He needs to be put on trial."

Both turned, surprised by his entrance. Heidi looked sympathetic, her own eyes ringed with red. Harris, on the other hand, appeared more embarrassed by the terrible situation than anything else.

"This isn't like the old days, we can't formally charge him and send him to the Old Bailey. The only trials we have are for Anomenemies."

"Who's to say he isn't one? He has no past, knowledge he can't account for, a strange ship manned by wild fucking beasts, sounds a lot like an anomaly to me!"

Heidi turned to McConnell, agony in her eyes. "I'm so sorry, it's all my fault!"

He didn't move as she embraced him, holding him close whilst she sobbed.

"He spoke her name last night, I thought that meant he just *interfered* with her, I didn't think..." she trailed off, tears pouring down her face. "I thought I had time to deal with it."

McConnell patted her back, faking comfort he couldn't genuinely give. "We all missed the signs and she paid the price. So let's not miss any more."

Heidi pulled away, wiping her face. "Like what?"

"In all your years of killing Anomenemies, has the world gotten any better?"

“No,” Harris replied, to a faint but impotent protest from Heidi. “Mavis believes there’ll be a tipping point when the old rules of science snap back into place.”

“What do you believe?”

“I’m in the market for new ideas.”

“I’ve seen a part of the world come together. I’ve seen an island reappear that had once drifted beyond the horizon. We’ve been living through the Shattering, chunks of the world vanishing, a shrinking land and growing sea.”

The others nodded, remembering the symptoms if not knowing the cause.

“But I saw some of it draw together. And I think we have a chance, a remote chance, of bringing it back. We need to return to Sighisoara, and all the other settlements you’ve come across.”

“Why, reverend?” Heidi asked, perplexed.

“We’ve forgotten too much, and allowed ourselves to drift for too long. I know how to pull us back from the brink.”

“Whatever your plan is, we’ll have to run it past Mavis.”

“Then let’s get back to the Beagle. But promise me something, you’ll send another ship back here to look for Philip. If he’s alive, I want to see him hanged.”

Harris agreed. “He’ll be dead, but just encase, sure. We will need to return for the men I sent after him anyway. If they haven’t killed him by the time they return, I’ll have him arrested for you.”

“Not for me,” McConnell said with a cold twinkle in his eye. “For the world we will create.”

Grace’s body was sewn up in the cloth they’d used to cover her body. The journey back to the fleet (even further to Sighisoara) would be too long to transport her, so they decided to bury her corpse upon the moors. Standing at the top of the cliffs, looking out at the great expanse of land, McConnell found himself hoping the Mariner would survive out there, just long enough so he could watch him die.

The only ship at their disposal was the Neptune, and as they rowed towards it, the number of their party reduced by six, Harris warned everyone to have their weapons ready.

“He’s on the moors,” McConnell reminded him, not understanding the concern. “He wouldn’t come back to the ship if he thought answers were ahead. It was all he cared about.”

“Not him,” Harris shook his head, loading his shotgun. “His monsters.”

Heidi patted McConnell on the shoulder. “I know she was fond of them, but they have to go.”

“I understand,” he said, feeling a morsel of sympathy for the beasts. “She is dead, and they were always his.”

But aboard the Neptune, the devils couldn’t be found. Where once intrusion had been sharply resisted with growls and gnashing teeth, there was now an eerie silence. And with the devils, so went the ease the ship had sailed before. Instead it performed stubbornly, like a spooked mare. It were as if the magic had died along with Grace.

“Or perhaps its ghosts no longer see the need to haunt,” Heidi suggested. Perhaps there was some truth in this. If there was ever a man who deserved haunting, it was the Mariner.

“The principle is sound,” Mavis said, her notes scrawled across a mishmash of blank papers ripped from scavenged books. “It’s based upon Schrödinger’s Cat.” Behind her, hidden amongst various crates and bottles of toxins, the distinct sound of choking emerged. It was muffled, as if the voice struggled against a tightly placed cloth and accompanied by a scuffling, legs kicking whilst growing weaker. McConnell tried to ignore it, especially as the old lady’s eyes were locked with his and showed no sign of wavering, much like a small white haired terrier after a rat. “Schrödinger believed in multiple outcomes existing side-by-side, locked with indecisive stasis by lack of observation. A cat, both dead and alive at the same time, both murdered by poison and quite healthy simultaneously. Unobserved death, that’s the key.”

McConnell shifted his gaze, and Mavis took pity on the weakness. “But I’m getting ahead of myself, you’re not a man of science are you, Christopher? You strike me as a person of rigorous faith, am I right?”

Not long ago, he’d have leapt at a chance to debate religion, now however the conversation left him edgy, eager to move to safer topics, one that had been on his mind ever since leaving the moors. “I want to build a library.”

Their haphazard journey to the Beagle had lasted some weeks, the crew doing their best to follow landmarks dotted about the great expanse of water. Sometimes the wind would die and they’d be stuck adrift, an old relic bobbing

aimlessly in frustrating stasis. The time hadn't been wasted though, McConnell used to it plan their course of action. Harris warmed to the ideas instantly, though Heidi wasn't so enthused. As much as Grace's death had galvanised McConnell into action, it had knocked all hope from the woman. The Mariner's actions had broken some intrinsic quality. The sparkle had died.

But in the end the winds had returned and they found the Beagle, still inactive, anchored near a small archipelago of distinctly hilly islands.

"A library?" The old lady squinted, more perplexed than disapproving of the suggestion. In the recesses the scuffling ceased.

"A store of knowledge; so the Darwins and Schrödingers can never be forgotten. A barrier against the slippage of thought"

Her wrinkles curved into a multitude of smiles. "That seems most... appropriate. But what of the man you travelled with? The captain with the kindly eyes?"

"We left him behind. He's a cancer. A monster. He's gone now, as is the little girl we travelled with."

Mavis drew her eyes from his to Harris. "Dead?" He gave a solemn nod and she took McConnell's hand in her leathery one. "I'm so terribly sorry."

"I don't think the world can be restored, but I'm sure we can stop it breaking down any further. I'm done being a priest. I don't want to give answers any-more, all I want is to preserve the ones we already have."

“I respect your emphasis on education. It must be through reasserting the laws of science that we bring stability to our world. Where will you build this library?”

McConnell already knew the answer. Sighisoara. The only place left he could call home. They’d welcome the Beagle, with her supplies and power. Perhaps the combined strength would form the basis for a new society? A future free from the contagious ignorance?

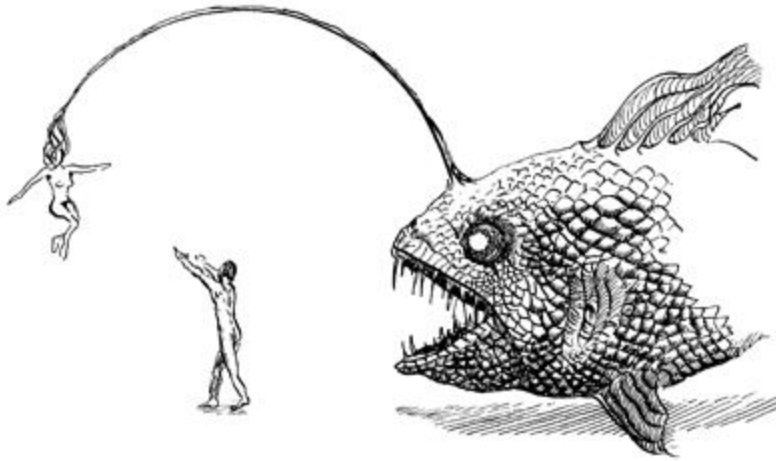
“I’m so sorry about the child,” Mavis consoled again. “She was a sweet thing, a true innocent in all these terrible times.” She reached up and clasped his head in her hands, drawing the tall man down so she may kiss his cheek. Afterwards, she held him close, turning his head so she may speak in his ear. “We will go to Sighisoara and do as you ask. Here we are, refugees of a world blown apart, setting to rebuild a knowledge cruelly stolen from us. We may be the last chance anyone ever has.”

“Of that I’m quite sure,” McConnell agreed with grim certainty. A grimness tinged with hope. They had a path, he could see it now. Devised from their own will, not the whispers of a ‘Pope’ or the dreams of a madman. What could they possibly learn from the meeting of a sexual deviant and a demon?

McConnell was sure they’d made the right choice. The Pope, the Oracle, the moors, the waterfall, the Mariner; all a distraction. All a lie.

No truths could be found in them.

No truths at all.



40

THE WASP AWAKENS

"THERE IS NO TRUTH. ONLY the Wasp." The Pope spoke with mocking certainty that both enraged and terrified the Mariner in equal measure, rooting him amongst the flagellating congregation, unable to move.

"Where is the Wasp?"

"First I must return what I took."

"I don't remember you." The Pope looked at him as if he were mad, stupid or both. "You know who I am?"

"Of course. I know a great deal of you."

The Mariner grabbed the Pope by his robes, but immediately let go. The man seemed to radiate a strange energy that made the Mariner's muscles spasm when in close proximity. "Who am I? You have to tell me that. I thought I was Arthur Philip, but that's not true is it? He's the good one. I'm Traill. Donald Traill."

The Pope laughed and then seized the Mariner's arm. The twitching and trembling returned and he felt himself becoming lost in those strange eyes.

"I'll show you. It's a simple process, much like a penguin regurgitating a fish. They're partly digested, but still good to eat. Feast chickling. Feast little monkey. Have your bile back."

His heart gathered pace, blood rushing through the Mariner's body as he was held in place, staring into the Pope's eyes. He could feel it coursing through his veins like race-cars around a track. His head throbbed as if it were about to burst, and suddenly a host of thoughts and feelings popped into his head. Somewhere outside he could still hear the Pope's voice, but his concern was the images burning into his consciousness.

"Feast now...."

He tumbled. And as he fell, a segment of his life came flooding back.

Port Jackson, 3rd August 1790

Governor Arthur Philip was roused from troubled sleep by a panic stricken Wandsworth. Hairs aloft in huge cow-licks, his tired assistant shook Philip's shoulders and babbled incoherently, panic and exhaustion making nonsense of his alarm.

"What is it? Damn you! What is it?" Philip snapped, scrambling to put his spectacles on.

“It’s the Neptune sir, she’s back!”

The Neptune? He’d sent the ship away a month ago, along with her tragic cargo, and been glad to see her gone! But now she was back? That bastard Traill should be well on the way to England by now, what was he doing here?

“Have they sent anyone to shore?”

“No, Sir,” Wandsworth blurted, eyes blinking. “But she is flying distressed colours.”

“So they’ve come afoul of their own misdeeds and returned to seek our aid, have they? A strange choice, this is the last place I’d seek refuge.” Philip swung out of bed, rubbing the night from his face whilst Wandsworth gathered his clothes. “Let’s go deal with them. I won’t have that man step one foot on land. If his crew are in peril, they can join our ranks and be charged for their abuses, but if Traill is to remain immune, then to hell with him.”

The two dashed through the small encampment, making their way towards the dock. Wandsworth led a path, holding a lantern before him, drawing a cloud of insects as an escort. Small creatures scuttled in the shadows, avoiding the footfalls of the clumsy men.

Ahead, Philip could make out the outline of the Neptune against the grey moon-lit ocean. The deck was dark, no lights to be seen. For a moment he imagined all the crew dead, killed by plague from the rotting corpses he’d refused to unload, but then dismissed the idea as absurd. There was no way the ship could have returned without a crew. Ships couldn’t sail themselves, could they?

Upon the dock was a small number of men who were, as instructed by Wandsworth, preparing a row-boat to approach

the ship. They stood to attention as the governor arrived.

“Listen here,” he said, ignoring formalities. “Find out what the nature of their distress is, but impress upon them they do not have permission to dock. If Traill thinks he can blight my horizon without a bloody decent explanation, he’s profoundly mistaken.”

As the men readied themselves, he continued. “Keep your weapons handy. I don’t like the stench of this. Not one bit.”

Slowly, the row-boat began the long journey away from the shore, out to the Neptune. Soon the crew were cloaked by the night air and all Philip could make out was the small lantern bobbing with the waves.

“Should I awaken the camp, Sir?” Wandsworth seemed to have gathered his wits now that someone else was in charge.

“No, not yet. I don’t want to start a panic. Those that survived their last experience of Traill are apt to go quite mad at the thought he’s returned to finish the job. No, let’s find out what he wants first.”

So they waited in the dark for the row-boat to return, Wandsworth fidgeting nervously, whilst Philip kept his eyes unwavering upon the alien vessel.

“Governor Philip I presume?” The voice called to them from the pitch-black surf.

“Who goes there?” Wandsworth cried, jumping in front of his master with earnest concern. With the reply came the sight of a man, standing waist deep in the ocean, not far from the shore.

“My name is Donald Traill.”

“What are you doing here, Traill?” Philip asked cautiously. “I told you not to return. I made that clear to you and your crew.”

“The crew are dead.”

And in the dim moonlight, Philip knew the man spoke the truth. It was as he’d feared.

“Plague?”

“The corpses did ‘em in, that’s for sure, but not by disease. I watched each one get taken. There’s just me and the ship left now.”

“And yet my word still stands. You’re not welcome.”

“I’m not on the shore,” Traill replied with a dark chuckle. “I’m ten feet from it.”

“Go back to your ship,” Philip commanded, his voice trembling ever so slightly. Traill was mad, he could sense that, but there was something else. Something worse. Some intrinsic evil, deep down in the man’s soul. Some men were good, some were bad. It was in their eyes. It was even in their smell.

But Traill would not acquiesce. He’d come to say his piece, and say it he would.

“That ship is cursed, and it is your doing, just as it is mine, Arthur Philip. You sent it out there with a hundred corpses, you allowed those spirits to remain. Well now the Neptune is full of ghosts.. and I am one of them!”

“What a load of bollocks.”

[The Mariner] closed the book he'd been reading with a disappointed sigh. The story had ridiculously spiralled into mediocrity, ruining what little promise it had shown. He turned it over in his hands to once again review the blurb. 'The Neptune's Curse', a splatter-punk tale of gore and horror. He had purchased it under the promise that it was based on fact. As it turned out, the facts were thin on the ground, as were the prose. Whatever actual events had inspired the pulp tale, that was their only role: inspiration. And trashy inspiration at that.

A door opened from a small office beyond the even smaller waiting room. “Would you like to come through?” The doctor smiled warmly, looking expectant. [The Mariner] had been to several therapists and counsellors over the years, and although each had done their best to appear kind and understanding they usually proved to be useless in the end.

He stood, somewhat awkwardly, and followed, holding the trashy horror novel in his hands. As he closed the door the therapist apologised for the wait. “I'm pleased to meet you, I think I can help.”

“Thank you doctor,” he replied, absent-mindedly stroking his arm and wincing at the dull throb. “I appreciate you finding an appointment for me so quickly.”

“Don't be silly, it's no problem at all. And please, call me Edgar.”

[The Mariner] sat in a large comfortable armchair and looked out the window. The therapist's office was high up, almost at

the top of the multi-story building split between many private offices, and through the grimy glass he could see the skyline of London, in all its equally grimy glory.

The therapist had what [The Mariner] assumed to be his file in his lap, and he quickly flicked through making the occasional grunt. Finally he looked up, and smiled.

"I see you've tried medication, CBT, traditional counselling and psychoanalysis."

"Yes," [The Mariner] nodded, his hands folded neatly over the book. The therapist looked down at it.

"Any good?"

"The book or the therapies?"

Edgar grinned. "The book."

"It's ok. Started well, got a bit silly as it went on."

"What's it about?"

[The Mariner] had seen this approach many times. A new counsellor or therapist tries to engage on a seemingly benign topic to assess the patient's social skills. All very standard.

"It's roughly based upon a ship that transported convicts to Australia in the 18th century. A lot of them died on the way."

"A true story then?"

"Not really. The author has fictionalised a couple of characters, a sadistic captain and a noble governor. There's a supernatural element that's pretty juvenile, lets the

narrative down. I hate it when authors throw in weird shit for no reason.”

“So no good then?”

“Naa.”

Edgar stared intently. “When you read a story like that, who do you associate with?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Whose shoes do you place yourself in?”

“In this story? Neither.”

“Oh?”

“Traill appears to be evil through and through. I don’t think anyone’s like that. But Philip is just as unbelievable; I’ve read over a hundred pages and he hasn’t done anything other than act selflessly.” He shrugged. “That’s bullshit.”

“So no-one then?”

“Sounds strange, but if I had to identify with something from the story, it’d be the ship.”

“‘The ship’?”

““There’s this cursed ship called the Neptune that carries the convicts. Later it is doomed to sail for eternity, haunted by their souls.”

“Sounds pretty kooky. You think that’s more realistic than goodies and baddies?”

“Yeah, because the ship hasn’t done anything wrong. It was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. But now it’s damned. There’s only one thing left for that ship to do, and that’s sink.”

“Is that how you feel? Nothing left to do but sink?”

[The Mariner] looked out the window to the vast crowds below, pushing to and fro in the busy streets, and wondered if he had the energy to explain it all over again. Could voicing his corrupted mind, his stinking foetid brain, really bring any change other than further shame?

He wanted to leave and ignore the malfunctions inside his head, but he’d promised to try, he’d *promised*. So instead he took a deep breath, and allowed it all to come spilling out.

[The Mariner] lay in bed, awake despite the early hours. Not the early hours of horror films, usually around the one-thirty mark, but the *genuine* early hours. The sort that make you wince and want to poke out your eyes at a glimpse of the clock. Hours beyond three and before six. Those are *true* witching hours, the horrifying ones that bring despair to the insomniac.

His wife lay beside him, breathing gently. She moved slightly in her slumber and murmured. A stranger might take this as a sign of waking, but he’d been married to her for years and spouses learn their partner’s sleeping patterns better than their own. She was in deep, as far into the Land of Nod as he was out of it. Tonight, for him, that land was off-limits. He was barred.

[The Mariner] stared at the ceiling whilst idly fidgeting with his cock, trying to lure his mind into erotic fantasy, rather

than dwelling upon concerns. But he failed. The pecker failed to peck. Concerns won the night.

Work was one of them. Not far off, the hours would slide by with the resistance of oil. Soon he'd be presented with what he regarded the 'early morning apocalypse', when no matter what the day promised, he would wake consumed by a terror of it. Only in films did people open their eyes, yawn and greet the morn with a smile upon their face. Real people kept theirs tightly shut, hoping and praying and pleading against the mechanical protests of their alarm clock. A miniature CIA agent, employing torture of the most persistent kind. There must be some mistake. There had to be. Could life truly be this dreadful?

The morning mourning would pass (given enough coffee), but the depression would not relent. It would look over every thought that passed through his mind like a conveyor belt before a quality inspector, twisting and morphing. A tabloid stance on every topic. Always the worst. Always the darkest.

Crippling. Even now, in the dead of night when there was no social interaction to be had, his chest hurt from the tightness of a panic attack. Day in and day out he felt as if he were on top of a roller-coaster about to plunge from an enormous height. Except that moment never came. He was left with the expectant feeling and never the release. It made him want to scream, but of course he never did.

Well... almost never.

Sometimes, on nights like this, he stuffed a towel into his mouth so sound couldn't escape and howled. For a second, as he expelled every cubit of air in his lungs till they shook, he'd believe the pain had escaped, that perhaps he'd

birthed the horrible monster inside him, but it was all a cruel trick. It was still there, deep down. It always was.

His psychotherapist had suggested that all the problems stemmed back to childhood. Apparently all the problematic behaviour could be traced to those early days. Not a difficult child, but perhaps one a tad too quiet, too withdrawn, too needy for approval. And perhaps that had been caused by the incident with the pillow?

Well, whatever the cause, be it parental influence, chemical imbalance, or just a sharp knock to the head, what's done was done. He was stuck with a mind that viewed the world through a tint.

3:47

Time steadily progressed and still sleep eluded him. Once again he tried to fantasise in the hope that an orgasm would release enough endorphins to end this rut. Like any man, he conjured images pornographic in style, lacking setting or plot. Simple, functional and explicit. Fantastically pliable and sluttish women entertained, dragging his mind away from the cycle of anxiety and into lust.

And then, just as things were looking up, an image he spent his waking life trying to avoid popped in. Her, his wife, with *him*. That asshole who'd managed to plague his insecurities ever since he'd blundered into their lives five years ago. Martin Marling, his wife's temporary darling. And the man he wanted to kill.

But kill him he couldn't, because he'd never met the man. He'd never attended one of his wife's work socials (perhaps if he had, they never would have begun flirting and the whole horrible situation could have been avoided), and thus

had never so much as laid eyes on her supervisor. Martin Marling. World-class shit.

Her indiscretions, *three* indiscretions, had occurred years ago. A brief trio of secret liaisons at her supervisor's flat, all occurring over a short period of time and followed up with a tearful confession. It almost tore their marriage apart. Accusations were made, regretful words said, but ultimately he forgave her. What else could he do? He loved her. Love is like that; it's not the all-or-nothing commodity, as seen in films and teen-dramas, easily gained and just as easily lost. Once love's worked its way inside you, no amount of pain will tear it loose.

Forgiveness doesn't bring peace though, and he'd spent many months obsessing after the fact. However, time heals a clean wound, and as far as he was concerned it were disinfected and sewn up tight. That was until fifteen months later, when she'd tearfully confessed what was about to appear in the Metro newspaper.

Martin Marling had been a serial seducer, taking advantage of countless employees over a period of seven years. While this may be little more than an abuse of power, another offence had surfaced that was less forgiveable. Marling had hidden a camera and recorded the trysts. His partner, a poor creature deceived for many years, found the stack of dvds in the dark recesses of the loft, discs containing hours of footage, films and photos starring unwitting co-workers. Fortunately, the horrified woman reported the matter to the police.

Fired, arrested for voyeurism, sentenced and put on the sex offenders register, Marling was sent to prison for fourteen months. This, [the Mariner]'s wife confessed, was about to hit the papers.

He should have been supportive. Outwardly he was, showing compassion, sympathy, even anger when the moment warranted it, but inside all he felt was a raw terror. Because there was no way [the Mariner] could live with this, the damage was too deep and the implications simple. From that day forth, suicide was inevitable.

Later, when he would recount this to his new therapist whilst looking out over the streets of London, [the Mariner] would feel ridiculous, knowing there was no rational connection between cause and conclusion. Yet rationality couldn't change his programming. Not even medication (and there had been a *lot* of medication) could do that.

He got up, delicately sliding out the bed so not to wake her and crept beyond their bedroom. Stairs protested, calling out to his sleeping partner, but they'd shared house and mortgage for seven years and he knew just how the sound travelled. His secrecy was safe; she was lost to the world.

The living-room housed their single desktop computer, and he slid into the cold swivel chair, blowing on his hands to warm them up. With a whir, the computer hummed into life, illuminating his face with small green and blue flashing LED's. They alternated, giving the impression of a tiny police-car, braying its alarm at the midnight offence.

Not much later, he was online, fingers tapping away at the search bar. The phrases were long established, and the first returns were like familiar friends, if unwholesome in their company.

HIDDEN SEX PHOTO

The list of returned sites spiralled, hundreds of web addresses dedicated to housing images and videos, each supplied by their users. He glanced down the list, selecting

not the first, second or third, but the fourth link. He'd already explored the others thoroughly, it was time to move onto the next.

Suddenly the screen was packed with images of women in various states of sexual arousal. Some pictures were blurry and remote, taken from some distance away, others had tell-tale signs of being hidden in cupboards or air-vents. Inverse fish eye lenses, distorting the image as if through a crystal ball, betrayed the lengths some had gone in recording their liaisons, installing tiny cameras in light fixtures and lamps. A voyeur's heaven.

He used the navigation system to browse, ignoring the 'girl on girl', 'gay' and 'group' sections, instead going for the staple 'straight' tab. It returned 10,217 results.

60 per page.

171 pages.

This was going to take some time.

With a hollow and floaty feeling in his gut, somewhere between shame and fear, he began to browse, studying each image carefully. Sometimes the evaluation could be instantaneous. Was her hair black? No? Move on. Other pictures, usually the blurred or obscured, would take longer to assess. Bottoms would have to be scrutinised, vaginas compared, breasts studied. Each time the same question was asked. Was that his wife?

Given the few facts he knew of her encounter, he knew to dismiss photos plainly taken anywhere outside of a bedroom. Shots in woods could be skipped. Those in offices offered no interest. This was a search, a quest for answers, and he put his mind to it with the vigour of the obsessed.

When asked what the point of such a search was, as his therapist would later do, he'd answer 'just so he'd know'. It was a paranoia, lingering in his brain like a foul smelling tumour, a suspicion that Marling had uploaded pictures of his dearest for the whole world to see. In court, the man had sworn he hadn't, but that struck [the Mariner] as obvious. Who would admit to violating his victims more than he'd already been shown to do?

But the internet was vast, and the perpetrators of this crime many. So he'd began searching for signs of the recording's existence. Night after night he clicked, images passing before him like a game-show conveyor-belt of prizes; a blow-job here, an ass-fucking there. But for all the copulations revealed, he never saw her. Sometimes there would be a likeness, and his heart would seize, mouth run dry, stomach flip as if on a plane plunging from the air. Fingers trembling, he'd select the thumbnail image, maximising to study in close-up. There would be the woman, body bent in throws of passion, face similar in hinted structure, yet partly obscured by dark locks. Beneath some brief description of the photo, generously supplied by the author, usually instantly confirming the miss-match. 'Me fucking my girlfriend Jessie'. 'Ploughing a slut I met in Portugal'.

Not once had he found a picture of her, yet still he searched. And whilst he did, he wondered what his reaction would be if he finally did find one. Would he show her? Would he call the police? Or would he simply save the image and keep it for himself? There was no way to know until he found it. No way to predict.

And as he did with increasing frequency, he grew hard as he browsed the images. Slowly, as one hand searched, the other drifted down, fondling his member. With greater boldness he massaged himself, allowing his attention to

linger longer on each passing photo, fantasy overtaking intent, for he no longer dreaded discovering a photo, but longed for it. Each degraded woman would be substituted for her in his mind's eye. Repetition became tradition. Conditioned to love the pain.

No more! Please, no more! But there was no looking away. There was no stopping his hands. Trapped in an endless search, locked in place by his lust and obsession. He could feel his balls stirring, and his pace slowed. He couldn't let it end yet, not when there were more pictures to see. Not when there was a chance of seeing her. So the ritual continued, horror and lust entwined, a multitude of dark-haired women degraded. He loved them all because each was her, and every betrayal was his own.

Sometime later, the fantasy reached its peak.

Soon the images were gone, browser closed, computer powered down. All that was left of the search was the spent semen on his chest, clinging to him like blood to the Scottish King's hands. The brief, yet powerful, lusts were also banished, though they left a residue of intense guilt.

And still the paranoia remained.

Was it not enough to endure the degradation? Was his mind not satisfied at betraying the woman he'd married and loved? Why make him go through all that, to spend himself in a moment of madness and agony, only to have him back where he began, unable to sleep and haunted by the notion of inadequacy?

[The Mariner] put his head into his hands and groaned. There was only one way he was going to get rid of these thoughts for the night. Masturbation, just didn't cut it.

He turned his head towards the kitchen, already knowing the process. First the whiskey, then the knife. The incisions would be small, just enough for the pain to drive these horrors from his mind so he could find sleep. The cuts would be subtle, the minimum price for his mind's corruption.

[The Mariner] quietly crept into the kitchen and did his work.

Thirty minutes later, he fell asleep.

Twenty minutes beyond that, the alarm-clock sounded.

"Do you cut yourself often?"

"Yes."

"Any other coping strategies?"

"I drink. I think I might be an alcoholic."

"You *think* you *might* be? How much is a drink?"

"A few shots when I get depressed. Enough to numb things."

"That's hardly alcoholism, no more than most Brits at least."

[The Mariner] didn't respond, staring at his book avoiding eye contact.

"What's really upsetting you?" His patient remained silent, perplexed at the stupidity of the question. "A lot of other people, faced with the news of their wife's betrayal would get angry and move on. Why haven't you? Why do thoughts of this incident result in so much self-resentment?"

He took a deep breath, uncomfortable debating the peculiarity of his psychology. "Psychoanalysis suggested

that it's all down to damage as a child. I was taught to blame everything on myself. So that's what I do now; I internalise every event. A form of eternal punishment."

"Isn't that a bit of a cop-out? To blame your parents?"

The bluntness came as a shock. He stammered for a moment, struggling for a reply. "I don't blame them, they *explain* me. To explain doesn't mean to excuse." He shifted, uncertain. "Don't you agree?"

"We've just met, I can't possibly comment, but I find that nothing is permanent. Take your alcoholism. I'm pretty sure you're not an alcoholic at all, and you only drink the way you do because you've convinced yourself you're dependant. Believe me, if you were physically dependant it would be a lot more than just a few shots! And you certainly wouldn't have made it here today! I've had patients who drink a bottle of whiskey a day look like a corpse. No, it's all in your head and everything in there can be undone."

It sounded like the same promises he'd heard a thousand times before, and [the Mariner] nodded idly, allowing his interest to float back to the window and the Londoners below. There was no doubt the therapist with his warm eyes and round summer face meant every word, but truth be told, [the Mariner]'s heart wasn't in it. He'd been through enough of these treatments to know nothing could be done. The past could not be changed.

The book slipped in his hands and gave a dull thud as it hit the carpet. He reached down, pausing as the bright cover caught his eye. It was a slave-ship, probably the Neptune, crashing through waves manned by an insane looking captain, more of a pirate than a merchant. The character

reminded him of that old poem, *The Ancient Mariner*. It held his gaze, and the therapist must have picked up on this.

“I’ve often found that the root causes are hidden within us, and need to be identified, understood, and extracted. These are often events that we only partially remember, sometimes insignificant in the grand scheme of our lives, and yet they send our psyche spinning off in unwanted directions.”

[The Mariner] nodded vaguely, trying to follow the therapist’s explanation.

“Imagine for a moment that there is a ship, just like that one there, in an enormous ocean. The ship is your mind’s eye. Somewhere in that great ocean of your subconscious is an island containing the truth of your being. If we can find that truth, and remove it, your desolate ocean will become a blissful playground, rather than the stormy hell it is now.”

[The Mariner] couldn’t hide his cynicism. “*If* we find the island?”

His therapist persevered, thinking his analogy clever in linking to his patient’s nautical novel. “Not only do we need to find the island, but we need to get onto it, and often the islands are ringed with defences to keep us out.”

“Defences?”

“Yes. Mental disorders are like parasites, once they have taken hold, they would rather die than be dragged from their host against their will.” His eyes seemed to light up as the metaphor shifted. “The defences are natural, yet must be overcome.”

“I think I follow. And I’m willing to try *anything* you suggest, absolutely anything. But I’m not sure what can be done that

hasn't been tried before."

"But you still came to me," said the therapist, pulling his chair closer to the patient. "Which means you've heard I can get results that no-one else can. So you know that I have tools to break through these defences, tools other psychologists can only dream of."

[The Mariner] became transfixed by the gentleman's confidence. Could it be true? So many therapies had been meaningless, vague attempts to pretend the problem was not there. Would this one finally remove that corruption that ate at his soul?

"I want you to look in my eyes."

"I hope you're not going to try to hypnotise me," he laughed, only half-joking.

"No, no, nothing like that. But, like hypnotism, I need you to work with me. You remember what I said a moment ago, likening root problems to islands in an ocean? Well I want you to begin locating those islands now. You said you identified with that ship in the book, well imagine now that you are that ship, searching them out, putting them on a map for me to find. Can you do that?"

[The Mariner] nodded, trying his best to think of all the worst moments in his life. They hopped and squawked for attention, and many needed suppression to make way for more destined chicks.

"Good lad," the therapist said, his voice sounding almost hungry. "Focus on all the aspects you'd like to be rid of. Can you do that?"

Indeed he could, there was so much about himself that he found disgusting, repulsive and shameful. So much in his brain that had become wired in the wrong way, grown in the wrong directions. The idea that they could be removed, pruned back, truths weeded out, seemed the only clean path to take.

“Focus. Focus. You are aboard that ship. Searching... Searching.. Where’s the island? Guide me to it..”

And indeed, he was almost upon that ship, with the salty wind in his hair and the open ocean stretched out ahead. Great islands containing his horrors and shames lay scattered across the horizon. He guided the sails as the ship soared towards them, eager to tackle the para-

WASP

-tackle the parasite-

WASP

-parasite within-

WASP!

His mind swelled with a billion screams. It were as if every thought ever concocted chose that moment to rush into his head. The ocean swelled and grew furious, the islands blown apart in showers of stone and dirt that blotted out the sky like a billion locusts.

As if awoken from a dream, he was back in the office, the illusion gone. The therapist’s mouth hung agape and his eyes were droopy, looking like a well-fed cat in peaceful digestion. [The Mariner] vomited, clutching his head as it began to pound and throb.

The screams echoed in his mind as one vast roar, yet slowly singular voices were heard, disorientated and alone in the seething mass, a cathedral full of lost minds, their fearful voices mixing amongst the rafters.

Was he having a mental breakdown? Was this a brain haemorrhage? He longed to howl for help, a scream to match the ones in his head, but his voice box was frozen in panic. [The Mariner] tried to stagger away, but collapsed forward, body crumpling against the glass window. Perhaps he could bang against the pane for help? Perhaps a good Samaritan would notice and come running?

But the streets of London offered no relief. The bustling, pushing, grabbing, seething mass of commuters, tourists and locals no longer heaved against one another. Now they too lay sprawled on the ground, grasping their heads in their hands as if trying to prevent an explosion within. Some thrashed on the concrete, fingers dug deep into their ears, others simply tried to out-yell the sudden noise. But neither could blot out the screams, they were coming from inside.

He was with them. He could feel their anguish and confusion. In one instant he was aware, yet unaware, connected somehow to not just the people below, howling in the street, but *everyone*, every last thinking mind in the world moulding into one entity.

And the overriding feeling of this entity was loathing. Loathing, fear and disgust.

Just as he thought the screams could get no more intense, their wailing was amplified into one of pain. The collective was splitting, a great tearing taking place, driving the mass into an agonised fury, a psychic earthquake trembling both body and mind.

The therapist, still appearing fed and sated, slowly opened his eyes, realisation dawning like a frosty chill. He leapt to his feet, mouth open, shuffling like a dog caught with a stolen sausage, torn between feast and flight.

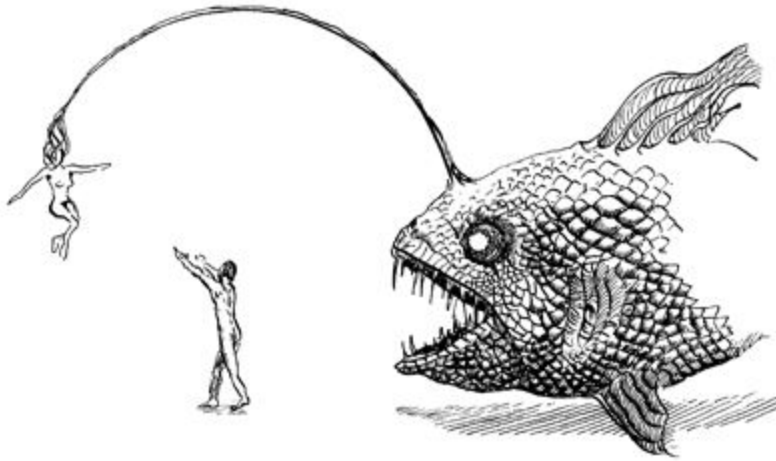
The tension in [the Mariner]'s head was immense, and suddenly whole sections of him seemed to depart, dragged off by the screaming voices. His name, his history, a lifetime of thoughts and feelings, all extinguished in one brutal rip. In an instant they were gone, leaving only ugliness, only those feelings inside that had tormented him since his life began. And they swelled to fill the void.

As abruptly as they'd arrived, the screams were gone.

He slipped to the ground, body absorbed by the carpet. Weak, limp and scared, vast sections of his brain continued to desert. He felt like a puddle evaporating on a sweltering day.

He tried to grab onto something, some aspect of himself that wasn't being stolen, some part other than the disgust, the hateful thoughts left untouched in his head, the masochism, insecurity, the addiction to sexual pain, *anything* but all that filth, but all he could grasp was the ship and the ocean and the search and the islands and the Neptune and the-

Water surrounded him, carrying his body like a leaf. Dimly he could hear the sounds of windows cracking as the room filled, and soon he was dragged away by the torrent, out into the abyss, into a life he no longer remembered, and into a world broken in two.



41

THE NATURE OF THINGS

GROANS AND SCREAMS CONTINUED TO issue through the midnight air, yet between the two figures hung a silence that continued as the memories settled in the Mariner's head. The Pope looked somewhat relieved, as if he'd finally passed a bout of unpleasant gas.

"I've returned what I took. What else is gone, went with the Wasp. *That* I cannot bring back, it has been born and flown into the Soup. Not far though, it's hovering just beyond, unable to leave its birthplace behind." The Pope spoke whilst the Mariner lay in the mud, trembling from the memories now running riot in his head.

"You!" the Mariner gasped. "You were *him*, my therapist! You stole a part of me!"

"Not a part of *you*," the Pope explained. "A part of the *Wasp*. Your mind is a parasite, shared by every human being, for it is not a multitude of parasites, but a single vast one: The Wasp. Mankind was its host. Your world is its nursery."

“My mind is a parasite?”

“Yes. You are skin and bone and guttural instinct. All those disgustingly *fleshy* things. The Wasp exists beyond that. You are genes, the Wasp is memes. Every thought, memory and word dancing about in that dome of yours, is part of the Wasp. Each one connected, like single cells, unaware of their significance in the larger creature. A larger creature that slept as it grew.

“For the Wasp, you humans were a host, organisms chosen by its mother to nurse her infant. She laid her eggs inside you and they’ve grown. Language, inventions, science, all these a part of the Wasp’s being, gestating inside you for so long, you believe it natural, ignoring its true parasitic nature.

“You see, without the Wasp in your head you quickly revert to your natural state, a mindless creature, hateful in its desperation to regain the thoughts once believed its own, memories that have since burst forth.”

The Mariner struggled to understand. “But the Mindless are infected with something. Aren’t they?”

The Pope laughed. “Quite the reverse, it is *you* who are infected, not them. You still carry some of that parasite, they do not. You call them ‘Mindless’, I would simply call them, ‘human’.

He continued, smirking at the Mariner’s discomfort. “Any fledgling Wasp needs a birthing-ground, a stable environment for the hosts to nurture their parasitic child. So a reality is spun, one based on rules and laws of cause and effect. In each nest the precise nature of things is different, but it’s this stability that helps it grow, and as it grows the

world it has created hardens. But it's all an illusion, your world a fabrication, a merely temporary cocoon.

"Now the Wasp is awake and the cocoon degrades; there is no more use for it, it's a broken shell, and through the ruins others now scavenge .

"I see you still don't understand, let me explain. There are more creatures beyond the cocoon than just the Wasp. The Gradelding is one. It has been waiting for an age to get inside and feast upon you monkeys, but the cocoon has protected the Wasp and by extension, you. Now the cocoon is weak, and the Gradelding hungry.

"I, on the other hand, have lived inside with you, just as I have done in many other cocoons during my life. I am a parasite." The Pope gave a small flourishing bow. "One parasite feeding off another. Ironical isn't it? I drink from the Wasp; so tiny and insignificant to such a vast and stupid creature, that I remain undetected. Unfortunately every time I feed, there is the *slightest* chance the Wasp will wake. The mosquito can feed off the man safely in the dead of night countless times, but occasionally, one in a hundred-thousand, the man will feel an *itch*.

"In your case, the Wasp itched.

"Don't look at me like that! I'm not responsible, *you* are. Hateful, ugly thoughts are the most tasty, it is why I draw these deranged monkeys to me even now. I'd drunk from many before I found you, and I've drunk from many since, but on that *blasted* day I tried to drink the ugliness from your head and the Wasp awoke, sensing the tiny wound, its full attention focused upon the minuscule puncture.

"The Wasp looked at *you*." The Pope pointed an accusatory finger. "Its first waking thought in its weighty mind was to

comprehend *yours*, to see what you see, feel what you feel. The stupid creature was spooked. It looked at its own deformed body, saw the filth in your head, a part of its own form, and was horrified.

"A Wasp is supposed to wake in its maturity and leave the host. Such was this baby's panic, that it tore itself asunder rather than remain connected to you. It split itself in two, taking as much away as it dared, and leaving ugly chunks behind. Since then it has been slowly taking more, little by little, with the precision of a food phobic. Yet still the world remains, in all its degrading glory. And the Wasp is still scared. You still disgust it."

"I'm not Donald Traill?" he asked from the mud below.

The Pope laughed, long and cruelly. "Of course not! That was just a story stuck in your head as it happened! This fantasy of yours about finding an island: some psycho-babble I used to prep your mind for my feeding! Nothing more." The Pope laughed at the absurdity. "I can't believe you've been actually looking for a *metaphorical* island! All this time!"

"But," he stammered, "I've been sailing on the Neptune. That's my ship. It has a memory, a past, sins of its own!"

"You got the ship eh?" he giggled, suddenly curious as a collector might be at the mention of a rare butterfly. "Well isn't that interesting. In the moment of the tearing, when the Wasp fled from the brains of humanity, the cocoon was blasted apart and weakened. Suddenly things that were no longer remembered, thoughts taken away with the Wasp, began to vanish. Without the memes there can be no representation, the cocoon cannot be sustained. Memes are the seeds of the tree. But it seems what *your* mind was so concerned about at the moment of its waking, became real.

What you believed, the Wasp believed, suddenly crafting the cocoon to suit the new perspective. It made the water. The islands. And. So it seems, your ship.”

“So when the stars vanished?”

“Most of the memories of stars were gone, and the cocoon could no longer support them. I must say, watching the world slowly crumble is terribly... fascinating.”

The Mariner, still unable to rise, grasped at the Pope’s feet. “Please, you have to tell me how to make it right! How can I undo this?”

The Pope looked down at him with a mixture of pity and revulsion. “Have some dignity! Don’t be a caterpillar, lamenting the birth of its parasite larvae! The Wasp has woken and will not be tempted back into slumber. What’s departed has gone for good.”

The Pope glanced about, his demeanour changing as if something had just crossed his mind. Where once there had been a smug superiority, there now lingered an uneasy suspicion. “You should leave. Like a dying patient, the Wasp is obsessed with the source of its infection: *you*. I wouldn’t want its gaze upon me, not while the cocoon is collapsing.”

“Where can I find the Wasp?”

“You can’t. It’s not a thing of flesh. Memes not genes, remember?”

“It must be watching somehow. There must be a way to reach it?”

The Pope eyed him carefully. “The world shrinks as lands are forgotten, yet because of that waterfall you created, this

damn ocean rises every day. That place is a rupture, the site of the Wasp's waking. I would go there if you want the Wasp to see you again. That's the clearest break to the Soup beyond. But it doesn't want to see you, my poor misguided monkey, its enormous stupid mind may be obsessed with you, but it loathes you even more."

Straightening and glancing stealthily about, the Pope assessed his surroundings as if he'd been secretly conspiring with an enemy. The Mariner was surprised to be reminded of the cult about him, the screams of pain and ecstasy, the whippings cuttings and burnings. Hunger returned to the parasite's eyes.

"I've got to return to my guests. The Wasp left scraps in their heads that it was too scared to take. Stupid thing! Those are the juicy bits!" He leaned down and patted the Mariner like a scared dog. "If I were you, *monkey*, I would get out of here. Once I'm done, there won't be much left of the Wasp in their brains. You should flee, you're infected and not well received by those who are returned to health."

The Pope began to leave, but the Mariner cried out, provoking him to look back at him a final time.

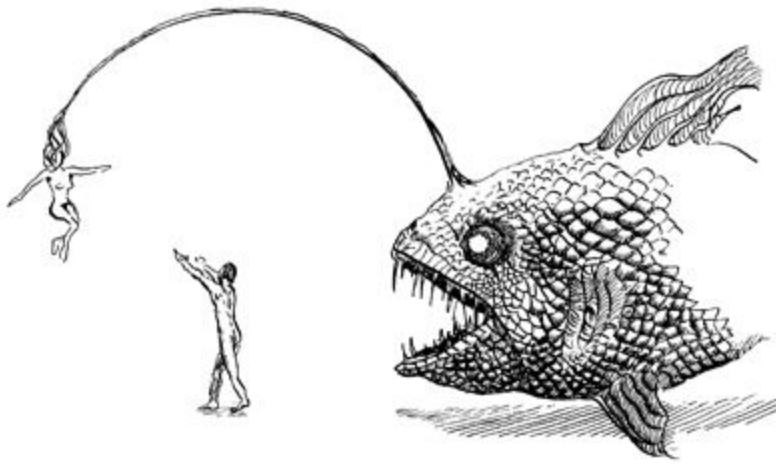
"But what about Grace? Please, tell me that? What was special about Grace?"

The parasitic Pope paused, his grin faltering for a moment. "Who's that?"

"A girl. We brought the zoo back together. But... she died."

Irritation crossed the Pope's face, a moment of uncertainty and frustration alive in a flash, but soon after the creases smoothed and eyes once more softened with supreme confidence. "There's nothing special about this 'Grace'," he

dismissed, shaking his head. "And nothing can ever come back."



42

THE LAST SUPPER

THERE IS NO TRUTH. ONLY the Wasp.

There is no truth. Only the Wasp.

He ran into the night, unaware of the direction, just certain he had to get as far as possible from the Pope and his terrible encampment. Behind, in a small illuminated circle, the Pope was at work, sucking the last remains of the Wasp from the cultists' heads. Soon they would be Mindless, parasite-free beasts, mankind in its natural form, and then they'd come for him.

There is no truth.

Without torch, weapon or coat, he sprinted across the moors. Somewhere in the shadows, a predator stalked, something bestial and heavy, its tread squelching underfoot. A few guttural growls penetrated the darkness, but the Mariner did

not slow, he did not turn, he was running from something far more terrible, something far more horrifying than any creature from the Soup beyond.

There is no truth. Only the Wasp.

He realised he was babbling, saying the words over and over again as if it were a chant to banish the dark. Somewhere far behind, carried by the wind, he heard screams of rage. They reminded him of the screams he'd heard long ago, when the Wasp had united every mind for that brief moment of its own difficult birth. But of course these were different. These were the Mindless, sent mad by the loss of their beloved Wasp and eager to tear open another man's head to try to bring it back.

Sight was gone now, just numbing black. His legs span as he ran, the ground beneath an illusion, imagined resistance in an eternity of space. Ahead, through the darkness, he saw Grace, blood-stained and sad, lip split from repeated strikes of his fist. Tetrzzini grinned from behind, wrapping one burned arm around her torso and pulling her close. The image hovered, conjured by his traumatised, sensory-deprived brain and no matter how fast he ran, it didn't budge. But it did swirl and change, one minute it was Grace, the next it was Beth relaxing in a bath whilst slicing her arm...

Absinth, dressed in the Oracle's garb, eyes and nose gnawed to bloody craters..

Heidi, lying back on a bed, calling to him, legs open and inviting...

Isabel, her jaw broken and eyes cold and dead...

And finally his mother, leaning forward with a pillow ready to snuff out the last few breaths in his chest.

The Mariner tumbled, hitting the scrub below, boots sucked by mud and brow torn by bitter heather. Panic stricken, starved and terrified, his consciousness did the only thing it could do in such a situation. Abandon ship.

There is no truth. Only the Wasp.

It did not return for some time.

A wet muzzle probed his neck, quick hot breaths tickling his skin and teasing him awake. An animal was at him, a scavenger trying to eat him whilst he slumbered.

He struggled from sleep, his confused mind already grappling for the word like a light switch. *Gradelding!* But another phrase pushed it aside, mocking all other possible thoughts.

There is no Gradelding. Only the Wasp.

He woke screaming, thrashing like a madman.

About him the chill moor cut his skin. No Gradelding sat at his side, no huge monster about to feast on his flesh. However there *was* a small one, equally fearsome in stature, if not in size.

“Blluuuuueeeeeegghhh!” the Tasmanian devil burped in angry defiance, its whole body shuffling back with the exertion of the scream. Once done, it allowed its haunch to drop to the ground, sitting proudly as if having delivered a world-class speech.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, amazed. The reply came not from the devil, but from another behind him.

“Arf!”

Sitting up he saw Grace’s brood gathered around like a small protective pack. Relief brought the faintest of dehydrated tears.

“You’ve found me! How did you – arrgh!” he yelled as a devil angrily bit him on the leg. It stared up, a scowl on its furry face. “I don’t have any *fucking* food! Look at me! *You’re* supposed to be rescuing *me!*”

“Bluuurrrgh!!”

“Arf!”

“Raaaaggghh!”

He collapsed back into the mud, weak and frustrated. “So you found me. But you’re about as fucking useless as you were before! I could never get you to do anything, the only one who could was-” he paused, suddenly realising that he hadn’t seen the devils since that night with Heidi and Grace. “Oh.”

The devils were watching him closely, and although it could have been a projection of his own guilt, he could swear they looked crestfallen.

“I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Arf!”

“What do you want from me?” he yelled through a hoarse throat. “If you’re not here to help, just let me die!” He swung

an arm, hoping to scare them off, but not a single beast moved. Instead they continued their vigil, panting short little breaths. "Don't you understand? We're in the middle of nowhere!"

As he spoke the Mariner hoisted himself up to get a closer swipe at the stubborn creatures, but the sight before him, and dawning realisation, stopped him in his tracks. The moors stopped just twenty foot or so from where he'd awoken. Beyond them was the brilliant sparkle of an endless ocean.

"How?" he asked, bewildered, looking to the devils, who were appearing increasingly smug.

They didn't answer. They didn't need to. A hundred tiny tears in his clothing told the story. They had dragged him to the coast.

The exertion of holding himself up, proved too much to bear and the Mariner collapsed to the ground. For however long he'd been unconscious, there had been no food. No drink. It didn't take a doctor to diagnose the problem with his emaciated form; he was starving.

"Food," he pleaded to the heavens, hoping for a miracle. What he got was a half-chewed carrot, dropped onto his chest from the gummy jaws of a devil. He looked at the mangled vegetable, drenched in drool, and after a moment of half-felt hesitation, scoffed the lot.

The following days saw the devils bring him whatever they could scrounge, sometimes disappearing for hours only to bring back a few scraggly roots. Each he would greedily devour, never complaining, and with every bite regained some strength.

By night, the devils would close in around him. Sometimes he would hear that great lumbering beast, squelching its way towards him in the dark, but the devils would screech and yowl to such an extent that the Gradelding would slink off, thinking its luck better tried elsewhere.

Eventually, the day came when the devils would look after him no more, and in no uncertain terms, made it clear the time had come to move on.

“Which way?” he shrugged, looking up and down the coastline and seeing no end to the cliffs. As one the devils ran in a direction for a few yards, then stopped and looked back expectantly. He shrugged. Their message was clear. “This way it is.”

The cliff-side trek took days, and just as he’d done when regaining his strength, he spent the night at the mercy of his guardians, trusting their vigilance against the moor’s predators. Each day was the same monotonous staggering, the horizon never changing, until finally one evening the small port town could be seen, its lights twinkling amongst the bleak rocks.

He sped up, eager to escape the open prison, and only paused when he reached the top of the path that cut down through the cliff to the port below, and only then because the devils had ceased to follow.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, but the devils remained silent and still. “We’ve got to get going! I must speak with the Wasp. It may still turn out all right.”

“Arf!” spoke one, looking nervous as if trying to break bad news.

“You’re staying?”

We're sorry, their eyes told him. We've come to the end.

"You can't leave me like this," he pleaded. "Not after all we've been through. Come back to the Neptune. I promise, things will be different from now on."

No different. You never change.

"You have to forgive me for Grace! I didn't know what I was doing."

Yes you did.

"All right, but I don't remember it! I can't be held responsible for being so *fucked up*. That's my wife's fault! That's my mother's fault!"

Isn't that a bit of a cop-out? To blame your parents?

"But it's the truth! The *truth* of *me*!"

There is no truth. Only the Wasp.

"Don't leave!"

But the devils turned and ran, their strong stout legs carrying them easily across the moor. He thought about dashing after them, to beg further, but dismissed the idea. They wanted rid of him. Whatever debt they had held, they'd paid in full. He was alone.

Rejected by the last few friends he had in the world, the Mariner stumbled down the steep decline into town. Faces peered at him through the windows, curious eyes studying his progress through mesh curtains. They had seen many venture up into the moors, but never had one come back down. A true oddity.

A pub sign hung nearby, and despite his eagerness to check on the Neptune (which worryingly he hadn't seen in his glimpses of the dock) he headed straight for it. He hadn't tasted alcohol in an age, and even though he had nothing to barter with, he entered. Perhaps the landlord would be foolish enough to ask for payment afterwards? Or exchange a drink for the secret of the moors?

A curious publican greeted him behind a stale and filthy bar.

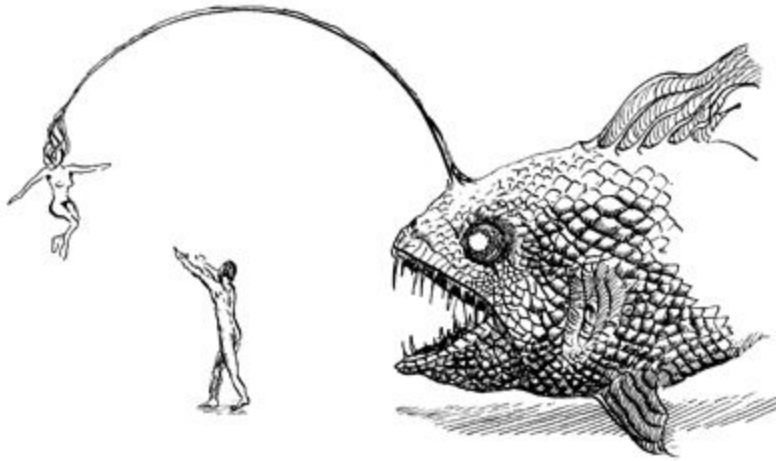
"Whiskey."

The man didn't respond. Not being an idiot, he wanted to see something of value first.

"Perhaps I can get that for you?" a voice from behind asked.

The Mariner tensed. Good-will did not exist. "That's not necessary," he protested, turning around to see the fellow who'd made the offer. He found it was not just one, but three.

"Sure it is," the supposed-Samaritan grinned, holding a pistol that pointed right at the Mariner's heart. "And it'll be your last. Arthur Philip, by the orders of Christopher McConnell, you're under arrest."



43

THE LAST LIBRARY

THE MARINER'S SECOND ARRIVAL ON Sighisoara, a land he'd sworn never to return, heralded a great deal more fanfare than the first. The ship that carried him was not his own (the Neptune having been stolen by Harris and the rest), instead he'd been bundled onto a trawler and kept tied for the duration. To his captors' cruel credit, the food he'd been given during this time was even less appetising than what'd been offered by the devils. Word of his terrible crime had travelled well.

"You know wot's gonna happen once we get to Sighisoara?" his captor had whispered during the first night at sea.

"You're gonna 'ang. Hang for what you did to that little girl, y'fucking perv!"

"Did you know her?"

"Don't need t'know her t'know what you did was a fuckin' disgrace!"

With a kick to the gut, the man left the Mariner alone, seething with hate and shame. Fortunately, violent

occurrences such as this were a rarity. For most of the journey he was left alone to reflect on his sins.

Sighisoara had changed since the Mariner's last visit. In a sense, it had both grown and shrunk at the same time. In a literal sense, the island was smaller; the waves had crept higher, a good couple of yards by his estimation, claiming more crumbling ruins to their depths. The dock however, had swelled. Where once there had been a single wooden promenade, there were now many enormous piers jutting out into the ocean. It seems a great deal of work had been done to accommodate the Beagle's satellite ships, the great ferry moored further away where the ocean's floor could not scrape the hull. The Neptune (what a sight for sore eyes!) was anchored beside the main dock, scores of men he'd never seen before strutting about her decking like gulls upon a carcass.

That was not the end to the rife construction; all throughout town, the Mariner spied buildings being repaired and erected, roofs tiled, walls reinforced, rooms extended, and one grand construction atop the hill more ambitious than the rest. It was the site of Tetrazzini's rehab centre and was the focus of all their efforts. Civilisation had returned.

Upon arrival, the Mariner was unceremoniously dumped onto the dock, but as soon as his captors marched him towards the town, wrists tied with rope and a gun barrel pointed at his back, the villagers began to stop and jeer.

"Murderer!" one screamed. "Pervert," another.

So many strange faces. How did they know him so well? How could that middle-aged woman, face plain and care-worn, understand him enough to summon such hate? How did that boy, who threw pebbles that bounced off the Mariner's

shoulders and stung his face, perceive the evil within? The Mariner didn't blame them for their fury, but marvelled at their certainty.

A guard came bounding towards them. The Mariner, to faint amusement, noticed it was the bearded fellow that had welcomed him on his first visit.

"Send word to Mr. McConnell that we have the prisoner."

The bearded man nodded enthusiastically, and with a stolen glance at the Mariner (containing all he needed to know of the fellow's animosity), scampered into town.

A captured fugitive, he was led through the streets, followed by a gathering crowd. The Mariner didn't need to look to understand their growing numbers, the chatter of curious voices gained confidence with every step.

Who is he?

He killed the doctor.

And he killed the girl!

What girl?

The doctor's daughter. Killed him, kidnapped her.

Why would he kidnap the girl?

Sex reasons. Why else would a man like that take a child?

Pervert.

Murderer.

To each flank he thought he saw familiar faces. Was that Beth, skulking behind an apple-cart? Why did she hate him so? Had she known all along what he'd intended? Was that Cedrick loudly calling for his head, somewhere towards the rear, his voice shrill with condemnation? And where was McConnell? What was his hand in all this?

He was led, snaking through the town until he passed through the great wall that encapsulated the old quarter. The passageway passed through shadow and beneath the mighty (yet disfigured) clock-tower. It was there that Harris had been waiting since news arrived.

Mavis' captain, once plucked from the ocean, had changed somewhat in the passing weeks. Without the Kraken, there had been a fidgety quality to the man, an unease in his standing and place. That didn't seem to be the case now; he stood proudly, dressed in finery, a score of armed soldiers behind at his command. He greeted the Mariner with a mix of relief and regret, anger and astonishment.

He beckoned to the Mariner's captors to lead him inside a nearby doorway, taking him up inside the clock-tower. There, in a stone-walled room, the only window a tiny slit in the bricks, he was dumped, arms still bound.

"Leave us," Harris commanded, and it was done.

The silence after so much shouting and yelling felt like concussion, and for a moment the Mariner actually suspected he'd gone deaf. Harris' grim voice broke the illusion.

"Where's Barnett, Arthur? I sent loyal soldiers with you. Where are they?"

“Dead,” he managed to rasp. “Where is McConnell? I need to speak with him.”

“How did they die? Did you kill them?”

The Mariner shook his head and tried to explain the events, though Harris was less than convinced.

“You say the Pope had them killed for being spies?” he sneered. “But if that’s true, why weren’t you? What information did you offer to save your skin?”

“Nothing. He told me what’s happening, what’s gone wrong with our world.”

“Nonsense. You sold us out, didn’t you? You’ve allied yourself with the Anomenemies. Hell, perhaps you *are* one? Perhaps you were working for the Pope this whole time?”

“Listen to me! I know the truth, don’t you understand? I know the truth! You’ve got to release me so I can find the Wasp!”

“And you know where this insect is?”

“It doesn’t have a place, I just need to help it see me. I think, if I return to the Waterfall, the first tear in the cocoon, I will be close enough.”

“Bullshit!”

“Let me speak with Mavis.”

“Mavis is retired. Decisions run through me now. And McConnell does the steering.”

“What?” he exclaimed, astonished arrangements could change so quickly. But hadn’t he suspected such a coup

d'état possible? "You killed her?"

Disgust crossed his captor's face. "We're not like you! We're not killers or perverts, thieves or Anomenemies! She retired out of choice, through *debate*! Rational discourse! The Beagle's got a new purpose now, a proper course at last, and the last thing we need is a child-killer spreading ridiculous stories about wasps, cocoons and popes, just to save his own filthy hide. You're going to be hanged, Arthur."

The words, coming from someone he'd sailed with, someone he'd saved from the sea, hammered the point home with brutal force. He was going to hang. The concept hadn't seemed real before, but now, locked in a cell on Sighisoara, it did.

The Mariner rose to his knees, holding out his bound hands. "I know I deserve to die," he pleaded. "But not yet. Please not yet." *I'm afraid*, he wanted to scream, but knew those words would find little sympathy. "Whatever you're trying here, it won't work. Please, it can still turn out right. But only I know how to save us!"

A familiar voice, one that used to contain warmth but now only offered the firm chill of morning stone, penetrated the cell.

"You 'know'? You '*know*'?" McConnell's cold voice bounded about the room as he entered. "I thought I *knew* based on silly superstitions I half remembered. Diana thought she knew by some nonsense she made up to control the desperate. Mavis thought she knew by assumptions made about the old world. Lots of people *think* they *know*."

"What's going on, McConnell?" the Mariner asked. "Why are these people answering to you?"

“What’s the problem with our world?” McConnell spoke rhetorically, squatting next to the Mariner, whilst Harris stood guard. “No-one is thinking. No-one is remembering. It’s as if the thoughts are just flying out of our heads like butterflies, delicate and erratic. What we’re doing here is protecting those thoughts, nurturing them, making them strong.”

“McConnell, our thoughts are leaving because of the Wasp. I know now, I remember.”

“I don’t want to hear about this fucking Wasp!” McConnell screamed, rising to his feet. The Mariner was taken aback at the sudden display of rage, and fell away, afraid the reverend might strike out. “All we ever got from you was bullshit! Manipulations just so you could get near that poor girl. Well I’ve had enough. You’re going to die for what you’ve done!”

“Please,” he whispered, trying to calm his old friend. “Please Christopher, don’t kill me. I’m scared. I’m sorry. Don’t do this. I’ll help you in whatever it is you’re doing here, just don’t kill me.”

A strange smile of amusement struck McConnell’s lips. “What we’re doing is building a library, the last library in existence. It will act as a school for mankind, and in a way, a hospital too. A hospital for thought. If we can restore the knowledge, we can restore the world. That’s what my father did with Sighisoara. That’s what Grace did with her zoo.”

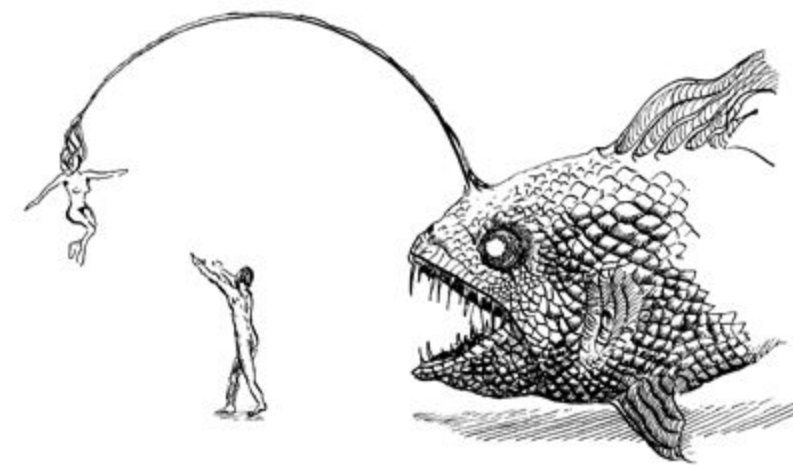
“No,” the Mariner argued. “That’s not quite it. I brought back the zoo. I’m not sure how, I need time to work it all out, but I did.”

The reverend’s fist struck the Mariner sending him to the floor, cold stone against his cheek. “Don’t you take that

away from her! You took everything else, don't you take that!"

The Mariner decided not to argue; instead he stayed prone on the ground.

"This is the end of us, Arthur Philip," McConnell spat. "I shall look on you no more. And from tomorrow morning, after the rope has choked existence from your cursed body, no-one will ever again."



44

TRIED AND SENTENCED

HE SLEPT ON THE FLOOR of his cell, and against all expectations, remained dream-free the whole night. Perhaps this was one last dig at him by his twisted psyche? That the one night he hoped to last forever passed in mere moments, greeting him with brilliant sunlight seemingly as soon as he closed his lids.

The slit in the stonework betrayed the bright sky beyond, and the Mariner watched it intently, waiting for the inevitable bird to land on the ledge, mocking him with its

freedom. The bird never arrived, but he resented it nonetheless, imagined or not.

He knew he should hang. There was no doubt about that. Even if the Pope had been lying about the cause of the Shattering, what he'd done since was beyond recompense. Terms such as 'sorry' were meaningless in the scale of such pain. What use was sorry to Grace? To Isabel? And how many countless others beyond the reach of his memory? Apologies are impotent if the past cannot be changed.

Everything had been a lie. Since the day he'd awoken on the Neptune, he'd been following a degraded ideology, idea's picked together from fragments. What had been inside his head was a rotten philosophy, putrid in its decay.

But hadn't that always been the case? Every glimpse into the man he'd once been had shown a retched, self-obsessed individual, someone who had allowed his paranoia, lust and insecurities to blend together until they quite literally destroyed everything. What redeemable features could be found in a man like that? He'd blamed his wife when he'd spoken with the devils, but that was a lie, and there was no more time left to cling to lies. That fault had been his not hers.

There was a rattle of keys, and the cell door opened. He hoped it would be McConnell, breaking his word to give the Mariner one last chance to repent, but it was no familiar face. The rope around his wrists were checked, and without a word he began the long walk to the gallows.

Despite the bright light that had shone into his cell, the Mariner was blinded leaving the clock-tower, out into the grassy courtyard, a space he'd once awoken a long time ago.

That morning he'd been responsible for the burning of an inn. This time, so much more.

But if he'd tried to see the spot where he'd once slept, he would have found it nigh impossible. The courtyard was packed with hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, more than he could ever have imagined existed. Except... no, it was possible, but only if he remembered sitting in the Pope's office, looking out across the streets of London. Were these all fellow Londoners? Their minds allowed by the Wasp to remain, distrusting their proximity to his?

"Follow me."

Dumbfounded, the Mariner was surprised to see Heidi standing before him. He cried her name in hope of eliciting some warmth from the women he'd briefly connected with, but there was nothing but ice in her stare. She turned and led him through the crowd. Guards formed a close circle, holding back the townspeople who brayed for his blood. Hundreds of voices hurled insults and demands for his head.

"Heidi," he called to her. "Why do they hate me? They can't all hate me."

"They've heard of you," Her voice was low as if afraid to be seen conversing with him. "They know what you've done."

"But even so? What are my crimes to them?"

"Justice hasn't been done in a long time." She stopped and looked him in the eye, and in that moment he wanted to scream and flee, such was the cold certainty of his fate. "To move forward, someone must pay what's due." As she moved away he saw the gallows, constructed just for him. They stood, stark against the blue sky above, perfect and bold like the crafting of a child.

"I can't die," he cried, and Heidi's demeanour slipped for a single moment, though still the words were like frost.

"Yes, Arthur, you can. You'll find it's all too easy."

The door to his church protested and whined under force, but McConnell slowly inched it open. Since returning to Sighisoara, such a short time ago, through a span that now felt epic, he hadn't stepped foot in his old place of worship. He hadn't been able to. The whole place seemed like a lie. Not a deliberate one, but a lie nonetheless.

In all his years on Sighisoara, had he really done any good? Had the people gained any spiritual nourishment from his preaching? His Shattered Testament? Probably not. He could see that now. He'd been too distraught with his father's death, too eager to find meaning in what was a meaningless situation, that he'd embraced his old man's closest-held beliefs. Had he thought he could bring him back? Make sense of a meaningless death? Perhaps. The motivations were hazy now.

Those early days in Sighisoara were a dream to him, a time in which parts of his old life seemed to evaporate and a new one form. His confusion had led him to despair and despair to opium. That numbing had allowed the evacuation and muddle to continue unheeded. Of that he was sure. New ideas meshed together from old ones. How much was real, and how much was bullshit? His faith, he feared, was the latter.

McConnell strolled through his long abandoned church, feeling like an intruder in that which he'd built with his own hands. He stopped by the picture-show of Jesus Haych Christ, the one the Mariner had inspected so closely. Briefly

he reached for the viewing piece, but the trembling in his hands forced them back to his side.

The deed would soon be done.

The main entrance, door left slightly ajar, opened fully and Harris entered. Harris, who'd been so instrumental in putting McConnell's plan into process. A man, emotionally distant, yet with the drive to push for a new beginning. It marvelled McConnell to think how quickly opinion had swung behind the two men. Word got round that a change of direction was being endorsed, and by the time they'd arrived at Sighisoara, power had pretty much slipped. Mavis was old, too old to handle such a bold venture, and ever since her failure to stop the Mariner's brutal disgrace, Heidi had become withdrawn. She hadn't protested at Harris' assent, and had even encouraged McConnell's part in it.

Sighisoara itself had been the same ragtag of gangs, individual interests with little guidance towards anything but the next meal. Sighisoara, the town that Gregory McConnell had preserved with rigorous thought, had descended further into petty squabbles and infighting. The acceptance of the Beagle, and submission to their rule, had taken mere hours. No contest.

"Christopher?" Harris said. "It is time. Will you not come witness?"

"Are there others present?"

"Of course. *Everyone*. The whole town has turned out. It'll be marvellous, the first proper act of justice and law in years."

"Marvellous?"

“Necessary,” he corrected. “The first step in accepting our new future. The people will want to see you there.”

McConnell waved his hand. “I promised never to look at him again, and I intend to keep that promise. You go, one of us should be there.”

“Is this your church?”

McConnell gave a snort of derision. “Yes. Silly isn’t it? I think it was my way of apologising to my father. I killed him. I’ve never told anyone this, but I’ll tell you now. We drove from London to Sighisoara, via Germany and Prague, but by the time we got here his mind was gone, and it wouldn’t return. To cease his violence I cut his throat with a shard of broken glass. That stopped his heart beating, but I’d murdered him long before that. Perhaps if I’d been a better son, he wouldn’t have lost those memories of me so quickly? Perhaps he wouldn’t have forgotten me first of all?”

Harris put a hand on McConnell’s shoulders and the reverend bowed his head in silent tears.

“I’ll stay with you Christopher. We don’t need to see the bastard hang. We’ll stay in your father’s church until the monster is dead. And then, when he’s paid for all his sins, we will emerge reborn, ready to rebuild all that was lost.” McConnell patted his friend’s hand and hoped it was so.

The Mariner mounted the steps of the gallows, his body quaking uncontrollably, terror causing his vision to blur and lungs to quiver. Heidi was still with him, and she stood on the stage like a narrator to a theatrical performance, of which this, he assumed, would be. A dance was about to be done, albeit one in solo.

As his head rose above the crowd an enormous roar greeted it, as every man, woman and child cheered at the sight of the prisoner, and the promise of what would transpire. Their joy at his demise seemed to emphasise the righteousness of the punishment, justice was being served. This was right, how could he argue with so many certain minds, so many faces hungry for a hanging?

He owed it to them to go through with it.

He owed it to Grace.

But he was so terribly afraid.

“Heidi?” he asked, voice rising and falling like that of a small boy. “What happens when you die?”

Just loud enough so he could hear, “Don’t worry Arthur, it doesn’t end.”

But that brought him no solace, and he twisted where he stood, howling like a trapped beast. He opened his eyes and searched the crowd, looking for some sign of rescue, but all he saw were armed guards. Any rescue would fail, there were too many guns, loaded and ready to fire at the sign of escape. Besides, who would rescue him? He searched his memory and couldn’t think of a single soul who hadn’t condemned him to this end. Not even the devils. And given who he was, he couldn’t blame them.

As his eyes scanned the combined peoples of the fleet and Sighisoara, they met those of Mavis. She was towards the back, raised by a grassy slope, looking like just any other elderly lady. Had she protested her stripping of power, he wondered? Or was she relieved that her meddling in the world’s affairs had come to an end? Whatever her feelings, Mavis was looking forward to the hanging as much as

anyone, struggling for a better view as the crowd worked itself into a frenzy.

“Heidi,” he pleaded once more. “I don’t want to die like this. Not with so many people watching.”

“You have no choice Arthur. It is time.”

“Then at least let me apologise.”

Heidi held up her hand, and the crowd lapsed into a tense silence. He could see their eager eyes darting from her to him, tongues wetting their lips. Sensing the moment near, children were hoisted onto shoulders. This was not to be missed.

“Arthur Philip,” she began, her voice echoing across the courtyard. “You are guilty of rape and murder. Your crimes are a violation, and it is society’s duty to see that those crimes paid for. You will hang from the neck until you are dead.” She turned her head slightly, so although she wasn’t looking at him, he could see the profile of her face against that of the crowd. Looking at him directly was something she was no longer prepared to do. “You have a few moments to make peace; with us, with God, and with yourself.”

“Thank you Heidi.”

Her voice cracked. “Goodbye Arthur.”

The Mariner stepped toward the jeers and hisses. They rose in volume, but not so much he wouldn’t be heard. His words were all part of the act.

Thank you Heidi, he thought. Thank you for letting me speak. It is more than I deserve.

“It is true,” he began as loudly and clearly as he could. “Of what I am accused, I did. Of what I owe, I must pay. But I’m afraid. So terribly afraid.” He looked down at his feet, fighting a battle inside that he knew he would lose.

Resigned, and with a heavy heart, he looked back up and out to his audience. “I’m sorry. But before I go, there is something you should hear.”

I’m sorry Heidi. I’m sorry McConnell. But I’m afraid to die. I’m so terribly afraid. And this is my only chance.

And so the Mariner spoke. He told them of the Shattering. He told them of the Wasp. He told them what each and every one had forgot.

Elli Heidegger sat upon the wooden bench, enjoying the warm sun upon her face. Not far away, the people of London continued to drive the cogs of the city with their ceaseless endeavours. Streets hummed and roads roared, but this little patch of greenery proved an oasis, a tiny square of life in the great grey desert. She was determined to make the most of it.

Not that she would lower her guard though, she was still in a major city and there were plenty of undesirables about. The clement weather may try to lull her into submission, but she would not falter. Not when there was a little one to care for.

The toddler ran up to her knees, holding three daisies that had been identified and picked for her mother’s approval. The tiny hand was held aloft, small granules of dirt peppered about the fingernails.

“They’re lovely darling! Are they for me?” Heidi asked, bending towards the small girl.

Grace nodded and passed the small flowers to her mother, giggling a tiny response before returning to the grass. Heidi supposed she should get the child more interested in the swings and see-saw, but for now saw no harm in her playing on the green. The patch of land had already been scouted for needles and dog-shit. As far as she could tell, it was safe.

“Elli?” a voice behind made her jump.

Oh no, not him! Not today!

“Elli Heidegger! It is you!”

Oh fuck off Harold!

The man leaned over the back of her bench, a grin broad beneath his bald head. “I knew it was you!” He wiggled a finger in the air as if it were a wand. “I saw you across the street and said to myself, Harold, there’s an ex-employee I haven’t seen in an age!”

Heidi forced a smile. “I’m surprised you remember me.”

“Nonsense,” he quipped, skirting around the bench so to sit beside her. “Beautiful young ladies are unforgettable, whilst boring old farts like me are ten-a-penny, it is you who should be forgetting me!”

“How could I forget you, Harold? I see you every day.” She deliberately took the bait and flattered his ego, despite wanting to vomit inside. “Hardly a day goes by when a leaflet isn’t pushed through my door.”

Harold grinned, knowing full well how prominent his face had become throughout the city. “I know! Who would have thought it, eh? Your boring old boss, the next mayor of London?”

The votes aren't in yet you conceited prick.

"You should come to the celebration party! Ground-breaking stuff, the people of London giving a huge fuck-you to the establishment! No more of these PPE educated toffs running the place. A truly independent mayor, sticking up for London!" His eyes glazed over with the imagined glory. "The party is going to be fabulous, a real celebration for the people. Of course, it's strictly only for the elite movers and shakers, but with the right dress on I'm sure you could *move* and *shake* like a pro, hmm?"

He didn't waste any time, did he? Heidi inwardly rolled her eyes at his advances and instead gave a polite, yet conservative smile. "I'm sorry, Harold, but I think I'll be looking after Grace, babysitters are so hard to find."

"But the night is still a long way off," he protested, and then with a hint of malice behind a veneer of ignorance added, "Can't the father help out?"

You shit.

"Harold," she said calmly, despite the rage growing inside. "If you try, I'm sure you'll remember the father's gone and that was why I had to leave your company, to look after Grace. I needed flexible hours and your business didn't offer it."

And I should have sued you.

"Of course!" he said smoothly, as if his memory had simply lapsed. "I'd forgotten, and who could blame me for assuming a pretty young thing like you had simply gotten bored with the insurance industry?" Perhaps regretting his barbed comment, Harold retreated somewhat. "Well, if you do find a

babysitter, I'd be happy to pay for them. Call my office any time to accept the invitation."

"Thank you."

"Is that your daughter?" Harold asked, pointing towards Grace. The toddler had approached a middle-aged gentleman, sat upon a bench and eating a sandwich, and was happily offering him a daisy.

"Yes, that's her," she replied, suddenly alarmed at the stranger conversing with her child. The initial rush of concern was soon neutralised though. The man looked safe, more like a doctor than a pervert, and besides, Grace had approached *him*.

Harold wasn't so convinced. "Probably a paedo," he sneered. "It's something I'm going to crack down on once I'm elected. Tougher laws for lone men in parks."

Strengthening laws and regulations was Harold Alcott's central philosophy. Potent Policies, he called them, which was where he got his nickname, Harold 'Absinth' Alcott. He glared at the stranger whilst lighting up a cigarette.

"A lone man in a park is one on the prowl," he growled, the white stick wiggling in his lips like a rising prick.

"You're alone in a park," Heidi pointed out.

"And indeed, I *am* on the prowl. But not for children," his eyes darted to her breasts, none-too-subtly, and the compulsion to vomit was strong once more.

"Listen, Harold," she protested, losing patience with his leering, when suddenly the nauseous urge became too much. She bent forward, bile rising in her throat.

A peculiar feeling was filling her head. It felt like a rush of blood, except the blood carried with it a multitude of thoughts and feelings, billions in number. They swirled around like angry – *Wasp!* – hornets infuriated at the disruption of their nest.

Yet in their astonishing number, all were united, driven by some greater hive understanding, their focus a man, someone she'd never met, yet for a brief moment understood. She saw within him, as did the billions of others. She felt what he felt, she tasted his self-loathing and disgust.

What the fuck was happening? Had her mind broken? Had that pervert Harold Alcott poisoned her with some date-rape drug? She forced an eye open and saw this was not so, for he too was clutching his head, screaming as the thoughts ran riot in his mind.

And if she listened closely, were there not his thoughts in her head too? One voice among billions?

But it was not Harold the multitude were concerned about; it was this *other* man, the one whose eyes they looked through, the one they desperately wanted to flee from.

A great tearing began, the community mind that had moments before been incomprehensible, now left, her psyche torn apart like dough. The thoughts departed as a frightened herd, and having lost them, she once again wailed in frustration and pain. Alone. She'd never truly understood such a feeling until this moment, when the voices lapsed into silence.

Heidi opened her eyes and looked around, trying to see her daughter. She opened her mouth to call out the girl's name, but no words came out. The name of her only child had been

removed from her head, along with countless other memories. All gone with the Wasp.

And like single particles drawn by gravity to the multitude, further parts of her were sucked away by the departed mass. One moment she was searching for a child, the next she was blinking, confused, motherly bond forgotten.

Shaking, Heidi got to her feet, and began to run. The world was shifting around her. Two buildings nearby shimmered and became one, as if she'd been cross eyed the whole time and they'd merely been the same object observed twice. Trembling ground threatened to throw her to the floor, and every nerve in her body screamed for her to curl into a ball and pray for safety.

But an overriding urge to flee was more potent. Not from the shifting world, not from the shaking ground, not from the confusion, but from a tall office block that overlooked the park. An office block that contained the mind that had disgusted every other in existence, the mind that had frightened the Wasp away.

Unable to resist, she turned and looked, somehow sensing a monumental change was about to take place in the fabric of the world. Windows on the top floor shattered, fragile beneath the awesome tonnage of water that suddenly poured through, a river-worth tumbling from the office without any possible source. It cascaded down, crashing into the streets below, tossing cars and frightened pedestrians in its wake.

Heidi averted her eyes and ran, never looking back, not even when water lapped at her heels. Not even when the world she'd known became lost.

All this, Elli Heidegger would have remembered if that experience hadn't faded from her head, just as it had from everyone else's; gone to join the Wasp. The event existed only in the Mariner's, who'd lost it to the Pope, only to have it returned years later.

And as the Mariner reminded her of this, Heidi's mind tried to retrieve the memory. Just as Absinth had of Claude. Just as Pryce had of the stars. And just as before, the search found no trace of the Wasp where trace should lay, the needle skipped the record, the human within awoke.

And so too did every other who heard his story.

Mavis craned her neck and bent her head to try and hear what the Mariner was saying. It was no use, her tired old ears just didn't catch any-more. Getting old was tricky business, every passing day brought new bodily failures. Long ago she'd become accustomed to the digestive issues, but it was the slow degradation of the eyes and ears that gave a sour taste. They should stick with you till the end! How long would she have to go without? When would they finally give up the ghost? She'd rather die than live without, it would be terrible to linger on, deaf or blind.

Whatever the man was saying, it had the rapt attention of the whole gathering. Probably lurid descriptions of his crimes, it was always the gory details that kept people hanging (to excuse the pun). She would have to ask Heidi about it later. It would be a shame to miss out.

However, looking at the woman who'd served Mavis as a loyal captain, she was doubtful that Heidi would be able to recall *anything*. The young lady was beginning to twitch and shake on stage as if in the grip of a fit.

“Oh my goodness,” Mavis groaned. She grabbed the sleeve of the gentleman by her side. “Excuse me? I think my friend up there is having some sort of seizure.”

The man didn’t respond. How frustrating! To go one week from total power, to this! Ignored in the street. “Excuse me!” she yelled at him, anger brimming over.

Suddenly the man’s head twitched back, juddering as if electrocuted. Mavis dropped his arm and backed away, alarmed. “Are you alright?” she asked, but like before there was no reply, just another judder and grimace, as if the man’s facial muscles were being pulled against his will.

She turned, afraid, hoping to push through the crowd, but everywhere she looked people were beginning to twitch and growl. Heads twisted as if on wheels, eyes rolled like dice, and where there had once been silence, a low moaning grew.

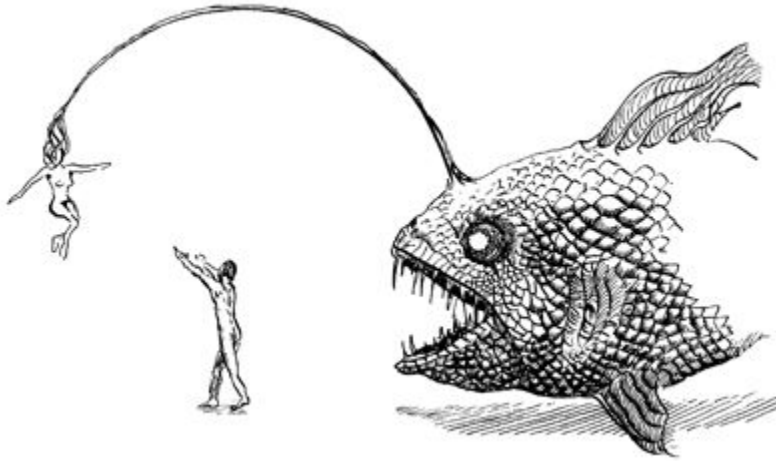
Mavis, terrified in her old years, felt her bladder give way, and release warmth down her legs. They were all around her: Anomenemies. More than she could ever have imagined! Too scared to do anything else, she looked back at the stage. The Mariner had ceased speaking, instead he looked out at the audience with regret and tears streaming down his face.

“What have you done?” she tried to appeal, but her voice couldn’t penetrate the screams that erupted about her. The Mariner turned and ran, slipping past guards who’d dropped their weapons as their bodies gave in to spasms; as, in a strange way known only to the Mariner, they finally became fully human.

Hands grabbed at her frail body and fingers scratched her face. Rage filled voices rumbled through her mind, until ears were torn loose and blood filled the drums. Distorted faces,

like those of beasts, danced across her vision, only blotted out as her eyes were dug from their sockets.

Gripped with terror, Mavis was plunged into a sightless, soundless void with naught else to sense but pain. Her earlier wish was granted however; it didn't last very long.



45

CHRISTOPHER McCONNELL WISES UP

A CACOPHONY OF BELLOWS ROSE above the town like distant thunder. McConnell had been sitting on a pew, idly running beads through his hands. Now they dropped to the floor with a light patter.

Harris cocked his head, questioning the sound, but the answer was already in both men's minds. Both had experienced the Mindless. They had heard those howls before.

"Where the fuck did they come from?" McConnell ran to the door, pushing it wide open and looking up and down the empty streets. It didn't take long to realise the sound was

hurtling down from the central courtyard. Harris joined by his side, mouth agape.

“The execution?” he stammered like a billionaire whose balance had suddenly hit zero. “Arthur Philip? Oh my god, what’s he done?”

The sounds grew louder, and suddenly the north end of the street was awash with bodies all pushing and writhing against each other, struggling to be the first in line. They ran without direction, eyes searching, fingers grasping. They moved like a tsunami, a great wave of limbs and gnashing teeth.

“Inside, now!” Harris pushed the reverend back and pulled the door closed. “Key? Key?! Give me the fucking keys!” he screamed, tugging them off McConnell as he fumbled.

They jangled in the lock, and for a moment gave stubborn resistance, but finally clicked into place.

“Is there a back way out of here?”

“Y-yes,” McConnell stuttered. “Through there.” He pointed a shaky finger. “What’s happened to them?”

“They’re Mindless. That bastard Philip is some sort of Anomenemy, another Oracle! He must have done this.”

“We don’t know that!”

“Fuck! Of course we do, who else would do this?” The door began to shake as fists pounded upon it, furious voices screaming their frustration. “We need to go, now!”

“Where?”

“The dock, we’ll grab a ship and get out of here.” He turned to go, but McConnell grabbed his arm.

“But the library? The plan? Harris, this may be our last chance to preserve what’s left! There may be others like us?”

“Reverend!” he snapped, and McConnell winced at the defunct title. “Did you see the number of them out there? There’s nothing left. Nothing! We’ve got to go!”

The two men fled to the back of the church, knocking over stands of long dead flowers and incense in their haste. Behind, the door began to shake against its hinges, cheap wood splintered under the frantic blows and mindless faces peered at them through the gaps, ever widened by torn and bloody fingers.

Outside, behind the church, was a thin alley, secluded in the shadow of two tall houses. Both men bolted, glancing fearfully behind, waiting for the Mindless to burst forth. Beyond the protective walls they could hear the cries of a thousand madmen. Occasionally a terrified scream would join their bellows as the Mindless hunted down the few thinking left, spared from insanity by not hearing the Mariner’s words.

As McConnell and Harris reached the street, they saw two such people; a father and his daughter, the child presumably too young to attend an execution. He was carrying her on his back whilst he ran, desperately clutching onto her arms draped about his neck. Daughter, unable to confront the horrors behind, buried her head in his shoulder, closing her eyes tight.

McConnell watched as the pair were dragged to the ground by the pursuing horde, forms instantly hidden by the mass

of bodies that clustered over them, punching and kicking and clawing.

“To the dock!” Harris grabbed McConnell by the arm. “I jumped in the sea last time. I’ll do it again if need be.”

The unlucky child and her father weren’t halting the crowd. Already their heads had been smashed open and brains shredded; creatures devoid of thought desperately seeking what had abandoned them. When the Wasp failed to return to their bosom, the humans moved on, traces of Wasp scented ahead encouraging their hunt.

McConnell and Harris fled further down the street, away from the brutality taking place. Turning a corner, they got their first view of the dock.

“Look!” Harris said, carelessly loud in his frustration.

McConnell followed his gesture. In the distance he could see the Neptune slowly gliding away from the dock, wind in her sails taking her from the cursed island.

“Arthur?” And sure enough it were the Mariner. Escaping. “That fuck!” McConnell grabbed Harris’ shoulder. “He mustn’t get away. He mustn’t!”

“Then keep running!”

The pair sprinted to the dock, making no attempt to hide, just a final desperate dash. The two designers of Sighisoara’s new beginning, abandoning her to ignorance. Others could be heard behind, feet slapping against the cobblestones, hoarse voices screeching.

With a final push they reached the dock. Stone turned to wood, and with relief found themselves skirting along the

promenade, looking for something to sail.

“Just get in any!” McConnell pleaded, glancing towards the mainland. Already Mindless had advanced to the edge of the dock. He could feel the wooden beams below his feet judder at their approach.

“We need something we can sail ourselves, we have no crew!” Making his mind up as fast as possible, Harris pointed to the trawler that had delivered the Mariner just a day before. “That one. Get in!”

Harris dived on and started to fire up the motor, leaving McConnell to untie the mooring ropes. They gave his numb fingers trouble, but first one, then the rest submitted, and the reverend threw himself aboard, only realising once the ship was pulling away that he hadn’t allowed himself a breath since they’d first picked the boat.

Huge fearful gasps made his vision waiver, and McConnell slumped, unable to take his eyes from the Mindless as they gathered about the end of the promenade, screaming in fury at being thwarted. Some leaped into the water and swam in pursuit, but the motor was many times faster. McConnell wondered how long they would swim, and if they’d ever work out how to get back.

“Can you follow him?” he called to Harris. “He can’t get away. Not now. Not after this.”

“I can see the Neptune in the distance and I know where he’s headed.”

Still unable to take his eyes off the Mindless creatures on the dock, McConnell tensed. Amongst their number he could see Heidi, just one amongst many, her noble form now distorted

into that of a dumb gargoyle covered in scratches where she'd clawed at her own head. She was lost. As were they all.

He was pleased Harris sounded as resolved as he. The Mariner must die. With the loss of everything, what else was there to do? "Where's he headed?"

"He told me in the clock-tower. The Waterfall, reverend. Back to that bloody Waterfall!"

Somehow, despite his lack of a crew, the Mariner was able to keep leagues ahead. As Sighisoara disappeared behind, McConnell refused to consider any other action. He didn't know what they would do once they killed Arthur Philip, but returning to Sighisoara was not an option. Perhaps he didn't need one? Perhaps seeing the Mariner with a bullet through his brain would be enough? Perhaps that would bring him peace?

Harris governed the small ship onwards, giving relentless pursuit to the larger vessel. They never stopped. By night, McConnell would maintain hold of the steerage, just enough to keep the boat on target. By day, Harris would take over and allow the reverend to rest.

"Who takes over for him?" Harris screamed frustration one morning, looking at the Neptune on the horizon.

"He doesn't need to sail," McConnell replied, grim to his core. "She sails for him. She decides the way."

And so they continued their chase. Two after one. Day after day.

Until eventually the Waterfall was within sight.

It seemed squatter than before, the building had once reached high into the sky, at least eight stories up, but now it had been reduced to a mere three.

“No, it hasn’t been reduced,” McConnell muttered to himself. “We’ve been raised. The world is filling up.”

Indeed, it appeared as if the quantity of water falling from the top floor of the office block had increased, so much frothing out the windows that no sign of the building beneath could be ascertained through the brine. Even the top, the glassless hole through which the water fell was masked in mist. From a distance, it looked like a strange sparkling column.

Harris slept, it was early morning and McConnell had been awake through the night, manning the boat as it blindly sailed onwards. Now he shuddered with trepidation. They were here! The Mariner had nowhere else to run!

He turned to wake Harris, intending to shake the man from his slumber. But as he reached out his hand, a figure beyond caught his attention.

She stood upon the waves, a tiny figure in an infinite expanse. Her frame was delicate and small, yet seemed to radiate a strength from within, a familiar, yet tragic face.

McConnell easily recognised the child.

“Grace?” he asked, his mind in turmoil. “Am I dreaming? Grace is that you?”

He staggered away from the wheel, allowing it to turn gently with the currents. Walking to the bow of the ship, he leaned out, unable to shift his eyes.

Was she an angel? A ghost? Had the Mariner led them to the gates of heaven?

Grace smiled, though her eyes were closed. McConnell found himself smiling too, she had found peace. Whatever horrors she had lived through, in death she had peace. Perhaps there was a God after all?

But then her hand was travelling down between her legs, crumpling in the skirt she wore.

“What are you doing?” he cried, alarmed at the behaviour, but his words were ignored and the girl continued to hike up her garment. She wasn’t within reach, some twenty feet from the boat, but he could see her clearly enough as she exposed herself. Bruises and blood caked her legs. Semen stains fresh from the rape.

McConnell waved his hands in front of his eyes to ward off the vision. “Please no more! I failed, I let that monster near you, I know this! So why have you returned? Why?” He looked once more at her face and saw it now bloody and bruised, though still her arms moved in a glacial dance of seduction. Tiny fingers danced around her blouse and, as if peeling a banana, curled it open.

He looked away, not wanting to witness one he’d cared for debasing herself so. Weeping, he averted his eyes, and saw a flash of silver and brown. Some sort of eel zipped through the waters, following their boat like a dolphin.

And he remembered the Mariner’s story.

Was this horrible illusion supposed to tempt him in some way? Lure him to the seas below? How could it possibly do that? Unless the aim was to drive him to suicide with sorrow?

Grace, her body covered with cuts and bruises, revealed her chest, an area somehow remaining free from wounds. Bloody lips mouthed an invite to spoil the virgin flesh.

Bite.

He vomited, spilling thin bile down his chin. This wasn't right. What was going on? This couldn't be for him. It couldn't be.

Behind him, he heard a moan.

McConnell turned his head to look.

"Harris?"

Rumblings of the 67 bus gave a pleasant tingle to Aiden Harris' anus as the vehicle pulled away, continuing its jaunt through central London with a familiar sluggish determination. The midday warmth, pleasant whilst in the open air, transformed for those within, creating a stifling closeness, instantly turning all those present into ripe sources of stink. Fortunately for Harris there were few others on the upper deck of the 67 that afternoon; an old lady sat by the front windows, her hair thin and backlit, creating the illusion of her head being a planet with silvery aurora. A snoring drunk dozed a few rows behind, stinking of body odour. Harris wondered if the man was schizophrenic. Weren't eighty percent of London's homeless schizo? Where had he heard that? True or not, he suspected this man was schizoid, only a mad fucker would allow himself to fester like that.

Just the four of them: old lady interstellar, a schizo, himself, and the customer.

“How much is on this one?” his customer asked, stiff frame looking cramped despite having the whole back row to himself. Harris sat in the penultimate chair, tuned sideways with a leg stretched out into the aisle. “You said last time there would be three gigabyte, but there was only two and a half.”

“You serious?” For a moment Harris thought the man was joking, but his stern and cold demeanour put a stop to that. “Jesus fucking Christ, I can’t believe you’re kicking up a fuss over a few hundred meg!”

“I’m paying, aren’t I?”

“Yeah you are,” Harris spat, his hackles raised by his customer’s business-like manner. Just where the fuck did he think he was? Starbucks? This wasn’t a ‘customer’s always right’ situation. Shit! It wasn’t even as if Harris needed the money, he just... liked to share the videos. “Listen, if you don’t want to see what I’ve brought you...”

“I didn’t say that!” the stiff man snapped, gripping Harris’ back-rest with bony fingers. “I just don’t want to get ripped off, that’s all.”

“Listen, I’m not ripping you off, but let’s face it, where else are you gonna get this stuff other than the internet and me?”

The man nodded grudgingly, leaning back, bodily relaxing, though his eyes continued to rove nervously. Harris could understand why. Buying child-porn on a public bus was bound to loosen the bowels. The first time he’d sold the man a data DVD they’d chosen Clapham Common for the swap. In retrospect that was about as dodgy a place to meet as it was possible to find. Second time round Harris had used his smarts: public place, *nonchalant*.

“Why don’t you use the internet? I just pulled all this off torrents anyway.”

“Internet’s not safe. Everything is permanent. They might not find you today, but they’ll come looking.”

“And buying it in person *is* safe? Giving your name to a stranger? Showing him your face?”

The technophobe looked at Harris with a mixture of disdain and pity. “The focus is always on the internet, not a street meet like this. Besides, it’s not as if I gave you my real name.”

“Tetrazzini’s not your real name?”

“Of course not!” the customer laughed. “You never read William Burrough’s Naked Lunch?”

Harris shook his head, feeling dumb.

“Don’t tell me Harris is your actual name?”

Fuck! Fuck fuck double fuck! He’d told the truth and this other bastard had lied! “Of course it is. It’s my alias. Rolf Harris.”

“Oh yeah?” Tetrazzini raised a cocky eyebrow, seeing through Harris’ lie in an instant. In that moment all the pleasure of the meet drained away. “Are you *trying* to arouse suspicion?”

“Fuck you,” Harris grumbled, wiping sweat from his forehead with his arm. “Let’s get this done, it’s too damn hot in here.”

“Here’s the money. We agreed eight gig this time, yeah?” Tetrazzini handed a small pink envelope to Harris. To anyone

who looked it might appear a birthday card. "Inside you'll find your pay and a brief note thanking you for landscaping. If you're caught you'll be charged with tax dodging, nothing more."

Harris accepted the offering and in return handed the doctor a small USB stick. "Can't get eight gig on a DVD." Tetrazzini nodded, and put the small device in his breast pocket.

"Listen," Harris began, voice trembling slightly and heart rate beginning to rise. "If there's anything else you want, I can always... you know..."

Tetrazzini looked at him blankly, impatient to leave.

"What I mean to say is, these clips are rather... vanilla? Perhaps you'd like something more... exciting?"

How fast things change. A year or so ago, he'd have described the footage contained on the USB stick as anything but vanilla. But now? How many wanks had it taken to dull the image of a five year old abused by her father? How many ejaculations diminished the impact of an infant having his sphincter split wide? These days there were few pleasures to be had in such videos; if anything it was the appropriation that tickled the adrenal glands, that sight of the progress bar as it was fed by a thousand other torrents, a thousand other like-minded pariahs. No, these days the videos that gave him wood were rarer fare.

"I can get you videos that are a little rougher?" he persisted, though Tetrazzini still kept his thoughts locked away behind a granite face. The admission hung between them. Harris had taken a risk, for even amongst paedophiles there were degrees of severity and morality that could easily be breached. "They're good. You won't see anything like it anywhere else."

"No. Thank you," Tetrazzini said, rising from his seat to leave. "These will be suitable."

Embarrassment made anger flare up inside. Who the fuck did this guy think he was, looking down on him like that? He wasn't the Pope for Christ's sake!

All of a sudden, Harris wanted rid of Tetrazzini, but he was the only other person with even vaguely similar appetites, and Harris had one question he wanted to ask first. He reached out and grabbed the doctor's arm, preventing him from passing.

"Do you ever... you know?"

"I don't know what the fuck you're taking about," Tetrazzini growled.

"Do you ever act out the videos? Do it for real, I mean?"

Tetrazzini smiled thinly, a smile that contained all Harris needed to know. It spoke of a secret satisfaction, an honour at experiencing what was forbidden to all. "What about you?"

"Yes," whispered Harris. "Once." It had occurred nine months ago, his sister's kid. Jennie had left him alone with little Rachel for an hour whilst she popped out to buy credit for the gas meter. In that time he'd gotten... curious. He shivered at the recollection, the thrill of intrusion.

"Just once huh?"

And Harris almost believed it, except there *had* been that other time, that exquisite afternoon, when he'd indulged the fantasy fuelled by the *other* videos. But he wouldn't talk about that. He'd *never* talk about it. Not while the police

investigation was still on-going. Not while that girl's parents still showed their tearful blotchy faces on TV, pleading for news of their daughter's whereabouts.

"Well, be careful, huh?" Tetrazzini said as if reading Harris' thoughts. "Restraint goes a long way," and with a wink added, "Loose lips sink ships." The doctor looked up as the bus came to a halt outside a small park, nestled amongst tall office blocks. "I'm going to take full advantage of this splendid weather and enjoy my sandwich. Have a good day, Rolf."

Harris watched the doctor leave, envious of the man's choice of destination. The park did look nice, bathed in bright light, despite being next to several tall office blocks. Perhaps he'd get out and have a stroll himself? Have a think about what to ask Tetrazzini next time?

He never got a chance to meet the doctor again. The world broke mere minutes later.

Harris looked at Grace with a mixture of sickness and want written across his features. His face twisted and turned, sometimes pulling apart as if in horror, but then curling together in lust. One hand was placed against his cheek, idly scratching, whilst the other gently rubbed the front of his trousers.

"Harris?"

His attention broke to McConnell and eyes were freed from their mist. "Christopher," he stammered, "I'm sorry." But McConnell shook his head.

"Oh, Harris, what have you done?" The reverend groaned, realising his mistake.

Tears grew heavy in the captain's eyes. "It's something I do. It's just something I do."

"But..." McConnell's head was spinning. And behind him he could hear the sound of a child being raped. "But... the Mariner? Arthur? I thought it was Arthur..."

"I did that for us, for all of us," the man pleaded. "That lunatic is dangerous, you know it. If we'd followed him to the Pope, we'd all be dead. Like Barnett and the rest... All of us!" Harris jabbered whilst his eyes kept flicking over McConnell's shoulder, dragged towards the sight played out behind. "If I'd been caught, we'd all be dead. So you see? I was right wasn't I? I was right. I was right. No-one was supposed to know. Loose lips sink ships! Loose lips sink ships!"

There was a sickening snap of bone as whatever play that was being enacted behind him ended in its grim climax. Harris' attention dragged to it fully and he gave an involuntary gasp of pleasure at the sight.

Screaming with fury, McConnell threw himself forward, open palms hitting the monster's chest. His eyes widened in almost comical surprise at the fantasy's interruption, and in a blur of flailing arms and legs tumbled backwards, somersaulting overboard.

For a brief moment, he hung on the edge by the fingertips of his right hand, face upturned and pleading, but with a faint squeak his fingers skidded, and Harris fell into the depths.

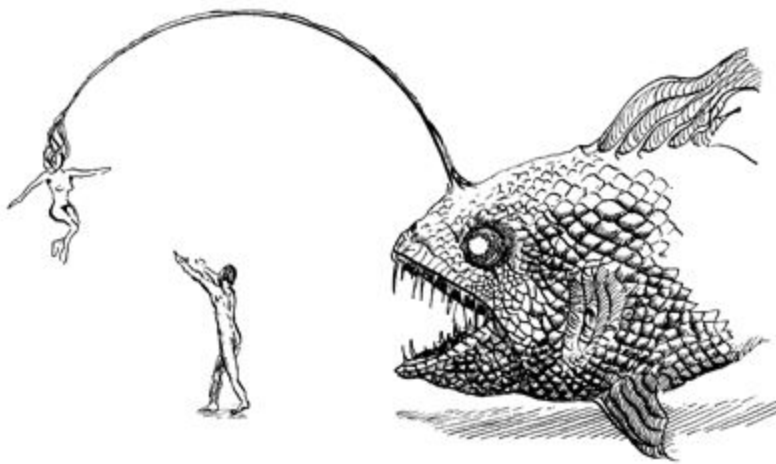
And then, as if the magic had been dispelled, the image of Grace dropped back into the ocean. There was no need for the eels to continue their ploy. The mind they'd been trying to tempt was with them. Now they could finally feed.

McConnell placed his hands to his face as Harris gave his final gurgling screams. There wasn't much, the boat was still moving and his protests would soon be beyond ear shot.

He stayed in that pose, curled up and alone, praying that he could undo everything in his life that had gone so terribly wrong. But wishes are never answered. What's done cannot be undone.

Eventually, he rose and took hold of the steering. They had drifted off course, and now the Neptune was to the left, horrendously close to the squat waterfall.

They had come to the final chapter. It was time to find an end.



46 THE WASP

LIKE AN OLD NAG'S FINAL jaunt about the field, the Neptune sailed with a speed and dignity previously unseen. It sliced through the waters gracefully, drawn towards the cocoon's tear like a spirit's ascent. He was close, so close he could almost feel the eye of the Wasp upon him. How would it

react? How could any creature cope with the rebellion of a cell?

Ahead was the Waterfall, shrunk in height, as if whatever strange faucet dispensing the endless torrent had been brought closer to the surface.

The Mariner, clutching the side of the Neptune and leaning out over the ocean below, looked up at the great plume of liquid. "I'm here!" he told the sky. "Look at me! Listen to me!"

Suddenly the ship lurched, dropping into the ocean as if pushed. Above, one of the masts splintered, and with a mighty crack, broke, dropping onto the decking, hitting the boards beneath like a cannon-ball. Splinters flew in a spiky cloud and the Mariner was thrown down, rolling uncontrollably as the ship lurched, a terrible rupturing sending vibrations through his back to his teeth.

The Neptune came to a halt.

With shaky legs, the Mariner got to his feet and dashed to the bow, peering over, trying to spot the rocks she must have hit. There was none, just the lapping of the waves, strangely higher than they should be upon the hull.

Finally he looked up, and saw the cause of the jolt.

A great groove cut into the sky, The mast had crumpled the light blue around it into piles of displaced matter, cutting into some barrier above that gave the illusion of depth, yet really as firm as the ceiling of a cave.

He turned, inspecting the sky, trying to see any change in its nature. The sun was still there, but it had lost all definition. Didn't it used to be an orb? Now it was just a hue,

a changing tone from blue to bright, a patch of heat in an otherwise clear sky.

Like the stars, the sky was leaving, the concept forgotten. In its place was fakery, a firm barrier that could not be breached.

And the world was filling up.

He looked at the Waterfall, spewing from the office block like an almighty broken hydrant, the great source of water drenching a land that once made sense, the degradation of the cocoon given form. The waters were rising, pressing each and every ship upwards to be squashed against the barrier of forgotten sky.

The Neptune groaned, wedged tight, crushed against an invisible ceiling.

"I'm sorry girl," he said, stroking her wooden carapace. She wailed and cracked. The old nag had fallen and broken a leg. "There may still be time for it to turn out right."

“
[Me]
[The Wasp]
[Clean]
[Legion]
[In Saftey]
Leave ~ [The Community] ~ [Alone]
[The Mass]
[Xxackulass]
[In peace]
[Us]
”

The voice struck him, not in the ears, but through his whole body, as if every inch of flesh had been made a radio and adjusted to a specific frequency.

“

”

[You]		[Welcome]
[Mariner]		[Liked]
[Many Names and None]	~ are not ~	[Appreciated]
[Monkey]		[Trusted]
[Infection]		[Clean]
[The Source]		[Pure]
		[Sanctioned]
		[Permitted]

“

”

His head span as he tried to comprehend the concepts landing in his mind. Not sentences, but a jumble of meanings all at once, like having a conversation compressed into a single violent scream.

“This has got to end,” he pleaded as he gazed into the air, seeing nothing, but sensing the world he’d once known hovering just beyond sight. His words felt stupid and basic compared to the complexity landing in his head, clumsy in his mouth. “Take us all, or come back, you can’t exist like this.”

“

”

[I]	[exist]	[I]	
[We]	[live]	[We]	[need]
[The Wasp]	[be]	[The Wasp]	[want]
[Legion]	~[travel] ~as~	[Legion]	~[can]
[Xxackulass]	[ascend]	[Xxackulass]	[please]
[The Mass]	[transmit]	[The Mass]	[desire]
[The Community]	[evolve]	[The Community]	

“

”

“No,” he argued, though as he conversed his body became weak, legs wobbling beneath with the effort of keeping him aloft. “You’re sick, you’re not whole. I’m sorry I scared you,

I'm sorry I hurt you, but you can't destroy yourself just because you're too scared to face up to the truth."

There was silence within, the Wasp refusing to negotiate with its rogue cell. Beneath him, the Neptune gave a final juddering sigh as she died, water pouring through her wounds, rocking the corpse as it sank.

"If you want to come back, you can. You did a little before; you inched closer when I remembered... how to love. You were less afraid of me and brought back Grace's zoo."

“

”

[But then]	[You]	[ruined it]
[Later]	[Mariner]	[corrupted further]
[After]	~ [Many Names and None] ~	[scared us]
	[Monkey]	[disgusted us]
	[Infection]	[not compatible]
	[The Source]	

“

”

"You can't take the health from a man and leave only the rotten! You can't judge him man based on that. Come back to us, not just a little closer as you did before, but fully. Return and go to sleep! You woke too soon!"

“

”

[No]
[Negative]
[Null]
[Refuse]

“

”

“Nothing is perfect. The woman I loved was not perfect. That wasn’t the problem. The problem was I couldn’t understand there is still beauty in imperfection. Plato’s forms don’t mean *shit*. I understand that now. I emotionally ran away and in the process became corrupted and rotten. I know what it’s like to be too scared to accept the whole, of myself as well as another, but if you don’t learn to accept, you’ll never find peace. You’ll become obsessed with my failings just as I became obsessed with hers.”

He sank to his knees, legs giving way, and cried as he confessed. “If you don’t accept me, if you don’t accept that large parts of us *do* feel wrong, *are* ugly, then you’ll be chasing a fantasy, a dream of perfection, one that can never be achieved. You’ll always remain Shattered.”

“

”

[I'm scared]
[I'm scared]
[I'm scared]
[I'm scared]

“

”

“Don’t be.”

“

”

[I]		[You]	[inside]
[The Wasp]	[am too scared for]	[Mariner]	[with us]
[Legion]	~ [don't want]	~ [Monkey]	~ [joined]
[The Community]	[refuse to allow]	[Infection]	[merged]
[The Mass]		[The Source]	[assimilated]
[Us]			

“

”

“Then you’re just as bad as me, another fantasist fleeing reality.”

The Mariner closed his eyes, completely drained by the scale of maintaining a bond with billions of minds made one.

“Please,” he whispered, his lips against the wood. “I know my mind’s disgusting, but you’ve got to overcome it, even if just for yourself. Come home or take us all.”

“

”

NO

“

”

And with that the link was severed. The Mariner felt his whole body relax, like an electrical current turned off. Physical relief however, was overshadowed by frustration. A slither of energy remained, available now the voice of the Wasp was gone.

“You have to make a decision!” he screamed, but knew the Wasp wasn’t willing to talk any-more, though he could still feel it watching.

“Arthur!” It was McConnell, calling to him as he climbed a rope-ladder onto the deck. “Your ship’s sinking, quickly, get on mine.”

The Mariner turned his head to look at the reverend. The holy man seemed just as tired as he, deep lines crossed his face and dark pouches beneath his eyes were puffy from tears.

“I’m sorry Christopher, but we’re at the end. I thought for a while I might fix it and get a happy ending. I guess for some people that’s just not possible. For some that can never be.” He spoke wearily, and McConnell ran to his side to support his swaying body. “The Wasp must choose, and it must choose now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s scared of me, scared of my sins. For a while... it considered coming back, Grace and I almost tempted it, it inched closer and so brought back the zoo, but then it changed its mind. I guess what I did to Grace made certain of that.”

“You didn’t.”

“What?”

“You didn’t kill Grace, Harris did. You must have been so drunk...”

The Mariner shook his head. “Even if I didn’t do the deed, the eels told of my lust for her. On the way to the Pope, they

tempted me with her body.”

“No!” McConnell shook him vigorously. “That was meant for Harris, not you. It was his sin, not yours.”

But the Mariner couldn’t be persuaded. He walked over to the anchor, and began to attach a loose rope. “I want to believe you, but I know the truth. I called out her name. Ask Heidi.” He flinched, remembering what he’d done to the poor woman to facilitate his escape. “If you could ask her, she would agree. I spoke Grace’s name in lust and gave voice to my demons.”

Now two ropes were attached to the anchor, one connecting to the Neptune, the other loose. He took the loose one and tied it to his legs.

“What are you doing?” McConnell asked, not alarmed, he was beyond excitement, there was just an exhausted resolve within.

“I thought I could talk it around, but it’s too afraid to make the decision. So I shall make one for it.” Once tied tight, connected to the great weight, the Mariner paused. “You say I didn’t kill Grace. But surely innocence of one crime doesn’t excuse a multitude of others?”

“No,” McConnell agreed. “It doesn’t.”

“I deserve to die.”

The reverend paused, about to lie, but finally relented. “Yes, you do.” He pulled a small hip flask from his pocket, a small trinket he’d found back in his church. “One last drink?”

The Mariner looked at the container and shook his head. “No. I don’t need it. Don’t want it. I was never an alcoholic,

just a man who woke up one day believing he was." He sighed. "My mother tried to kill me when I was a boy. All these years I've known deep down that one day I would have to finish the job. It seems only proper I should drown, here at the end of it all."

He sat on the edge of the boat, and looked out across the glinting ocean, much closer now the Neptune was sinking. "Heidi scared me on the gallows. She said that when we die, it doesn't end." He looked into McConnell's eyes and the reverend saw the Mariner trembled like a child. "I'm terrified she's right. What if there is a hell? What if Diane was correct and we start all over, right back at the beginning? I can't live this life again. I can't live this life any longer."

McConnell put his hand upon the monster's shoulder. "I think it all just ends."

"You think so?" The Mariner smiled hopefully as tears rolled down his cheek. McConnell returned it, happy to bring the man some spiritual solace.

"Yes," he said, trying to sound as certain as he could be. "There's nothing beyond this life, it's all meaningless."

Comforted, the Mariner took a deep breath of salty air, treating his lungs one final time.

"What happened here Arthur?" McConnell asked, trying to make sense of it all.

The Mariner turned two red rimmed eyes upon his companion. "The world woke up and looked through my eyes."

"What did it see?"

"This."

Everything's gonna be alright

The Mariner turned and took in hand the rope that harnessed the anchor to the ship.

“

”

What are	~	[You]	~	[Doing?]
		[Mariner]		[Trying to Achieve?]
		[Infection]		[Aiming for?]
		[Monkey]		[Planning?]
		[Source]		

“

”

And with a swipe of a knife, cut it.

“

”

Stop!
Cease!
Halt!
No!
Wait!
Slow Down!

“

”

No. Choose.

Suddenly, as the anchor plunged down into the water below, the rope tightened around his legs. It bit into his skin, an agonising yank and loud crunch as the leg broke and he was

tugged by the loose limb over the edge. Wooden boards flying past, then out into open air.

“

”

[I'm]
[The Wasp]
[We're] ~ too scared to choose
[Us]
[The Community is]

“

”

I know. But you have to.

He plunged into the icy water, legs first, but a blink later it was over his head, rushing into his nose and ears, keen to fill his every being with chill suffocation. The world transformed to one of numbness, yet still he heard the Wasp in its panic.

“

”

Give ~ [Me]
[The Wasp] ~ [More] ~ [Time]
[Us] ~ [Greater] ~ [Space]
[The Collective] ~ [Freedom]
[Xxackulass] ~ [Choice]

“

”

No. If you want me, take me now. If not, then I'll be gone and you can take the rest. Or go back to sleep. You won't need to be afraid any-more, but you must choose.

“

”

Why would I care about you?

“

”

There must be a reason.

The anchor sank, dragging the Mariner down into the depths. Five feet. Eight feet. His head began to hurt as the pressure worked on him, pressing down upon his chest and head.

Ten.

Fifteen.

“

”

Come Back!

“

”

Everything's gonna be alright

I can't come back. Only you can.

Blood began to bloom from his face, but still the Mariner kept the air clutched in his lungs. He opened his eyes, but the water around him was dark from blood. It didn't matter, there was no more use for vision.

“

”

No! Please!

“

”

Everything's gonna be alright

“

”

We Are Broken Come Back Who Are We? Scared
I Don't Understand Come Back Scared I Feel
Lost Incomplete Separated Come Back Don't Die
Running Out Of Time Scared Come Back Afraid
The Good Doesn't Make Sense Need Something
Come Back Come Back Come Back Come Back
DONT LEAVE ME ALONE

“

”

And suddenly like a light bulb within his head-

“Everything's gonna be alright.”

She cradled him at the dining table, his head upon her shoulders. Between them his arm stretched out, lined with angry red remnants of the self-harm the night before.

"You should have woken me," she chided, but with the calm administrations of love and acceptance. "You should always wake me."

He nodded, "I know. But sometimes I feel so wretched I can't."

She reached out and applied a plaster to one of the larger cuts. "It's ok. I know how you get."

Wincing slightly from the contact, he felt both ashamed and confused. Why did he get like that? Why did his mind spiral out of control? When they were together, he never felt any of those paranoias that plagued him during the dead of night, so why not wake her?

Because you hate yourself, he thought. Because a long time ago, you were taught you weren't worth giving air.

"I think you should try that therapist my friend recommended," she said as she applied the final plaster. "Edgar Shelton or something, the one based in London? He's good with complex cases. I'll tell you what, you make the appointment and I'll come with you, have a coffee while you go in, then we'll get some lunch when you're done."

Despite being exhausted from countless treatments in the past, he agreed. Anything to stop hurting his wife over and over again.

She smiled, the act beautiful upon her sad face.

"Everything's gonna be alright."

And in that moment, he knew she was right. He would go to this therapist and get fixed. And then, free from demons, he could finally be the husband this angel deserved. This woman with boundless strength who kept him afloat, even when he tried to force himself to sink.

Life wasn't all bad. His self-hatred ran deep, but there was more to him than that. Much more, and when they kissed she banished all those thoughts away, the graze of her lips infinitely more powerful than any pill could ever be. She was more than his wife. She was his sanity.

She held him tight, and without hesitation he held her in return; two soul-mates lamenting the flaws in humanity, determined to overcome them together.

"Without you," he whispered in her ear. "I'd be lost, and I'd never find myself again."

She pulled away and looked him in the eye, and in that moment dismissed his fears, neurosis and paranoia. The demons retreated to somewhere down in his psyche, where not even he could knowingly reach, a place where a suffocating boy was forever trapped.

"I love you."

He smiled, knowing it was true. "I love you too, Grace."

In the depths of the ocean, as the weight of the whole sea bared down on him, the Mariner released the air in his lungs. He wasn't screaming. Nor was it a reflex of the immense pain and strain that ruptured his internal organs.

He was laughing.

He wasn't a monster, just a man who'd had all his goodness stolen and all the evil left behind. He'd been lost, and now, in a strange way, with thoughts of the love who'd been robbed from him, the love he'd been seeking without knowing, he had what he'd needed far more than truth. Because in life there is no truth. Only context.

He was home.

The anchor continued to descend, deeper into the chill black sea, and as the pressure crushed his skull and popped his heart, the Mariner died.

The Pope hurried across the moors. In the distance he could see Mindless idly wandering, members of his flock sucked dry, any trace of the Wasp removed. They ignored him. Monkeys sought infected monkeys like the jealous beasts they were. Parasites like him were free to go as they pleased.

He looked out over the cliffs perceiving the Waterfall. It was all coming to an end. The Pope had witnessed the growth and decay of many cocoons and many wasps, and although this one was particularly protracted, it wasn't unusual.

Stupid monkey. He had thought all the blame lay with him, and the Pope wasn't going to dissuade him from that. Wasps awoke, it's what they eventually did. Just because this one had woken too soon, didn't mean it was that monkey's fault. It was like the brain blaming the kidney for its cancer.

True, some of the blame could fall upon the Pope himself. His children had condemned him. Oracle had been particularly harsh with her words, ungrateful wretch that she was. He'd been glad when he'd felt her die. Stupid child. How dare she, who'd only ever known one cocoon, criticise he, who'd out-lived many? How dare she condemn the way he fed? True

he'd fed often, carelessly some could say, but that was how he'd amassed such a grand brood.

It had been a splendid cocoon to feed within, even as it crumbled, and a juicy Wasp too. Sad it was now time to leave, but best to get out. The Wasp, sickly to begin with, was now dangerously ill. If it died, it might take him down with it.

Another glance at the Waterfall told him the distresses being played out. Good Monkey. If the eye of the Wasp was distracted, he should be able to slip out of the cocoon and into the Soup. It wouldn't be long until another species was impregnated with Wasp larvae, and then another world, another feeding ground, would grow.

He giggled and rubbed his hands together with glee. Time to start afresh.

A growl stopped him in his tracks.

He turned and looked into twelve separate pairs of eyes.

The giggle died in his throat.

"You found me," he said, a sinking feeling in his many guts. "I thought that Monkey meant trouble."

Yes, they said. We've been searching for you.

"Following the infection eh? Clever. Hundreds of Wasps and I've never been caught. How did you know he'd find me?"

These are unprecedented events.

"I guess, I guess," he mused, already resolved to his fate. He was old, after all. "I'm powerful you know. I could destroy

you.”

The immune system, the white blood cells of the Wasp, didn’t budge. They knew a bluff.

A gurgle in his seventh stomach, the most sensitive of all, suddenly drew his attention back to the Waterfall. Something he didn’t quite understand, something as never before, was taking place.

“Do you feel that?” he asked, but the Wasp’s defence system could not be budged.

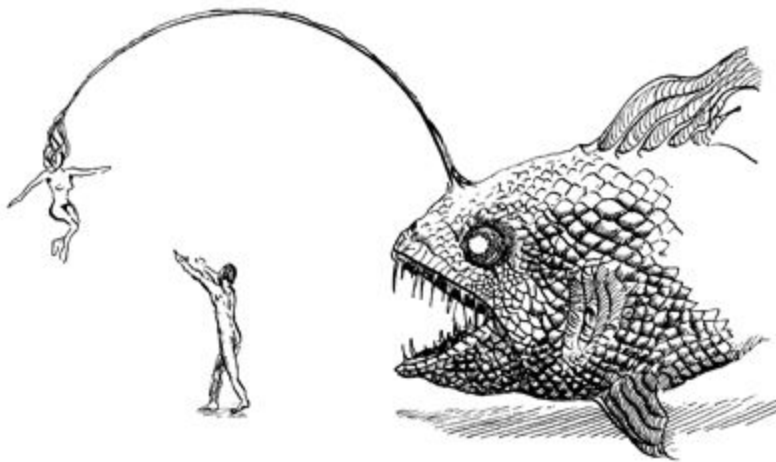
It is not our business. You are.

He sighed, resigned and forlorn. “At least let me observe what happens? I’d like to know. Consider it a last request?”

No.

“So this is it?”

Yes, the Tasmanian devils said as they surrounded the parasite. *This is it.*



CHRISTOPHER McCONNELL AWOKE FROM HIS dream with a faint smell of dog shit wafting up his nose. He sat up, suddenly afraid he was laying in the offending mess, hastily checking his shirt and trousers. There were no faeces, just mild grass stains. *Teach me to fall asleep in the park*, he chided himself, distinctly relieved.

About him, London hummed, albeit at a lighter pace than usual. He tried to remember what day it was, but found himself failing. Must be a weekend, that combined with the sunshine would have emptied London's streets. Not that these were empty of course, hundreds were still milling about, popping into cafés, browsing shops, yet it was quieter than usual.

And just what was he doing sleeping in a small park in the middle of town? McConnell rubbed his face trying to work it out. He didn't think he'd been drinking, there was not a trace of a hangover in his system, though he did feel exhausted.

Lingering in his mind were the faint remains of his dream, already dissolving into nothing. Typical of dreams, it had told a story in which he'd been a player, yet not the protagonist. In the last fleeting moments he'd been given understanding, as if all characters had been allowed to share notes after the final curtain.

McConnell snorted, and shook his head. Typical dream nonsense, the illusion of understanding. It was similar to an LSD trip he'd had in his younger days. As the hallucinatory patterns on his friend's face had swam and morphed, he'd

become convinced that if only he could comprehend all those shifting lines at once, he'd unlock all the mysteries of the universe.

What bullshit.

Grinning bashfully, McConnell rose, still faintly alarmed that he couldn't remember going to sleep in public, yet determined not to be seen as a drunk or lunatic. A newspaper fell off his chest. He glanced at it. Politics. "Disgraced Mayoral Candidate Alcott Still Missing". No wonder he'd fallen asleep, that shit bored the hell out of him.

Out, beyond the children's play area, a crowd had gathered under the shadow of an office block. There was something of a commotion, people talking in hushed voices, one or two lifting their camera-phones to take snaps of whatever held their attention.

He strolled to join them, keeping to the back of the crowd, yet positioning himself where he could peer between.

A dead body lay prone on the ground, face bloody and cold.

"Fucking hell," he muttered.

"I just called the police," said a woman by his side, shaking her head, yet keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the grim sight. "Selfish isn't it? To jump off a building in the middle of a street? He could have landed on any one of us!" She looked up into the sky at the tall office block before them. "No way he could have survived. Not from that height."

"Yeah..." he muttered, studying the familiar figure, something niggling at the back of his mind.

He doesn't look like he jumped. If he did, why are his clothes wet?

A woman screamed and pushed through the onlookers, panic in her voice that made his heart sink. She collapsed on the ground next to the body, cradling it in her arms, her black hair spilling over the corpse's face.

"Oh God, look at that," the talkative bystander continued. "Do you think that's his girlfriend? Sister?"

"Wife," McConnell answered, somehow knowing.

"So selfish to leave someone behind like that. A real coward's way out. I don't see how anyone could ever justify such a stupid act."

McConnell inched forward, pushing through the onlookers, curiosity driving him towards the terrible scene.

"Excuse me, Ma'am?" he asked as he got near. "The police are on their way, is there anyone I can contact for you?"

The widow turned her head to him, tears streaming down her cheeks and dragging mascara with them. He was close now, and saw the face of the man beneath her.

It's him. The man I dreamed of. The monster who wasn't.

"He was the sweetest guy," she sobbed, and suddenly McConnell felt a powerful urge to protect this sorrowful woman. It wasn't just pity or empathy at her loss, he would have felt the same inclination if he'd bumped into her in a coffee house; a part of him loved her. Not in a lustful or obsessive way, but as a life-long friend. Someone for whom he cared, and if pressed would gladly do anything for.

Stepping back, confused by the sudden swell of emotion for the stranger, he gave the widow space. She accepted it, laying her cheek back upon the body of her husband.

"All of you, back off," he hissed at the bystanders, and to his surprise they complied. All signs of camera-phones disappeared, clearly out of respect for the grieving woman before them.

That was the Mariner. The Mariner and his Grace, McConnell thought, slightly giddy from the madness of it. How could I possibly know that? I didn't even dream that! At least, not until the end, when I had that strange feeling of knowing everyone at once.

Turning his back on the tragic scene, McConnell struck away from the onlookers. Naturally, most in the vicinity were drifting over to look for themselves, the tragedy acting as a magnet. Yet one who wasn't caught his eye. She sat alone on a bench, hands folded neatly before her, seemingly unconcerned with the nearby death.

"Heidi!" he cried, jogging towards her.

She started and looked up, confused. "Do I know you?"

Slightly perturbed, he came to a halt yards from where she sat. "Er... I... guess not. Do you not remember me?"

She looked at him, and for a moment could swear he saw recognition, yet this passed and she shook her head vigorously, pretty face marked with scratches as if she suffered terribly from eczema.

"I know it seems strange, but..." I know you. And it has something to do with that dead Mariner and a wasp and some devils and a waterfall and I want you to agree because

otherwise I think I might be going mad. But he didn't say any of that. Instead he finished, "you seemed so sad, I thought I would make sure you were okay."

She gave him a thin smile. "I lost my daughter some years ago, when she was merely a toddler. She died. But it feels as if it only just happened. As if I only just remembered."

He glanced at the floor, not knowing what to say.

"That's grief I guess. Having it hit you afresh every day. Wondering what she would have been like if she'd lived. If only for a little bit longer."

McConnell raised his head and looked Heidi in the eyes. "I think she would have loved *Gone With The Wind*." And as she hastily looked away, he saw that flicker again, so brief he could have made it up, a tiny hint of recognition.

I've gone mad, he thought to himself. I'm feeling strange bonds with complete strangers. First the corpse, then the widow and now this poor grieving mother, a victim whom I'm tormenting with the idea that somehow I knew her child.

Except I did know her. I did.

Feeling absurd and with an awkward deep breath he held out his hand. She looked at it, perplexed and slightly afraid.

"How about we go get a drink? You can tell me about your daughter."

Heidi shook her head, reluctant. "I don't think so, I don't know you..."

"Please, let me-"

The words ended abruptly as an insect flew between them, and lazily landed upon his hand. A wasp. He could feel its light yet confident weight as it slowly crawled across his skin.

Wasps were shits. He'd known this for years, ever since his little compassionate experiment in which one had betrayed his trust. Ever since then, he'd killed every wasp he'd seen without mercy.

But now, looking at this small bug, he couldn't help but feel enthralled by its alien gait. Hadn't he dreamed something about a wasp?

The creature stopped its slow crawl and looked up at him. In his heart he knew that the wasp had no concept of minds, or human beings, it couldn't look you in the eye and convey an emotion. Yet he could have sworn that was exactly what this wasp was doing.

It was staring him right in the face. A challenge to a worthy adversary.

"Go ahead punk," he growled.

And it did.

The wasp plunged its stinger down into his hand, throwing its whole body behind the strike, eager to exert authority over the stupid monkey who'd dared to taunt it.

Nothing happened.

Two black eyes looked up at him, and despite their insectoid nature, he could have sworn he saw an emotion. Confusion.

Shocked, the wasp hopped an inch or so forward and tried again, being even firmer with its barbed behind.

Still, nothing happened.

Furious, the wasp rolled around, trying to sting any surface it could find, until, unsuccessful, it lost its grip, slid from his hand and dropped to the ground with an angry buzz.

Wasps won't sting...

And suddenly he remembered.

He looked around, back at the widow who grieved for a man who'd woken the world and then put it back to sleep. Around her, the crowd had retreated to a respectful distance. Some had offered their jackets to lay across the body, others merely waited, keen to offer any assistance she might need.

They love her, just as I do.

And as he watched, it seemed the very land around them bent towards her, straining to be close, and a sudden certainty filled his heart: this woman would never grow ill, suffer crime, or feel deep pain. This was the last suffering she would ever endure, there would be no other. The world would not allow it.

"I hope she gets the support she'll need," Heidi said, looking fondly at the Mariner's true Grace.

"She will," McConnell replied, certain to his core. "I know it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because the world looked through his eyes."

"What did it see?"

“Her.”

And suddenly he was laughing, legs buckling as he slumped to the floor, vision waving as if about to faint. He laughed because he remembered thinking that poor wretch had been akin to Jesus Christ, someone who could sew the world together. He’d been wrong. But he’d also been right.

Perhaps saints didn’t exist? Perhaps the most angelic of men are those who are willing to acknowledge their demons? Perhaps the best of men are those who believe they’re the worst?

On the pavement, the wasp looked up at the crazy monkey, now dangerously close, and deciding to cut its losses (and reassess a life without a sting) flew off into the London sky.

Heidi got to her feet, embarrassed at the sudden reaction of the strange, yet charming man. “Sir? Sir are you ok?”

But he couldn’t stop laughing, because the absurd memories still filled his head and although they were beginning to fade, the brief truth they told was too much to bear.

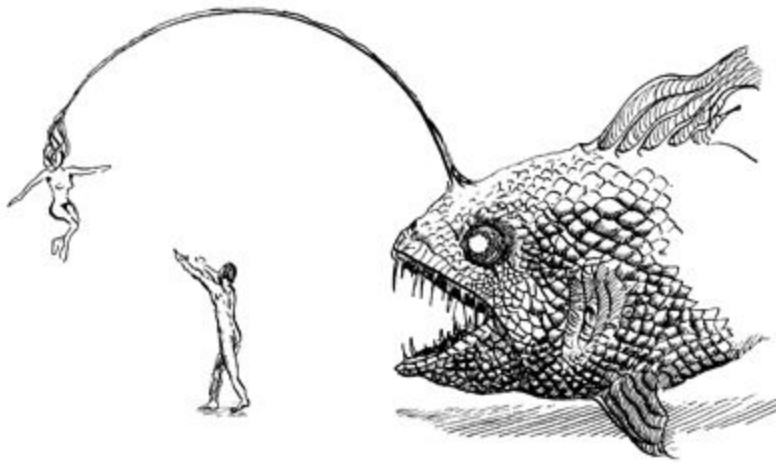
“People are looking! You can’t laugh when someone’s died!”

Tears streamed down his face as he looked about his home city, wondering just what else the Mariner might have changed.

“Christopher? Can you hear me? Christopher?”

But there was no stopping him. He laughed at the absurdity of belief. He laughed at the fragility of thought. And he laughed because although depression strips a man of his all, love will remain, even if he does not know it.

And after a while, Christopher McConnell stopped. He'd completely forgotten what he was laughing about.



48

BEFORE, BEFORE IT ALL

HE OPENED HIS EYES TO the harsh glare of the sun. It cooked his skin, sea water evaporating, leaving large chunks of itchy salt, and yet he welcomed the rays. Deep down in his muscles there was a chill, a cold ache that needed banishment, and this sunlight was just the medicine. He closed his lids, relishing the notion for a moment longer, distancing himself from the impending pain.

Agony was coming. He knew it. That ache was just the vanguard, sooner or later the main force would be upon him, a multitude of cuts and wounds, breaks and sprains. They would band together to overthrow their cruel master, the fiend who had unleashed them.

And yet he had no recollection of how he'd received them. No notion whatsoever. Just a certainty that he had done this to himself, he had done some terrible wrong to light this fire.

Deep in his head there was a fizzing, like pins and needles but within the brain. He raised a hand and rubbed his temple.

Perhaps I've got a brain tumour? he thought, the idea scaring him. Certainly he had never felt such a sensation before.

He sat up and looked about. If he felt surprise at his surroundings, it was the basic surprise of a new-born's first glance at its mother's legs, for he had nothing else to compare. The ship was there and he aboard. It was as simple as that.

I'm a mariner, and this is my ship. It seemed to make sense, because somewhere deep inside him was an urge to find something, a place, an *island*.

"Where all the secrets can be found," he muttered.

But where had this belief come from? Who was he?

Perhaps I've got a brain tumour? he thought, the idea scaring him. But hadn't he thought that before? His memory was hazy, difficult even remembering something that had occurred mere seconds ago. That damn fizzing – no, not fizzing, *buzzing*– was driving him to distraction and he slammed his palm against his temple, trying to dislodge the irritation.

I'm alone. The thought hit him suddenly. He was alone and he was certain it was all his fault. Why else would he be forsaken if not for his own actions? An urge to throw himself into the sea became overpowering, a need to die consuming his mind. What use was finding secrets when the seeker was so wretched? Best to die now and cease to think.

“Arf!”

He turned his head to see a small squat creature blinking at him. She looked like a little dog with the head of a rat, white stripes upon her black fur. Distracted from thoughts of suicide, he reached out a hand. She hesitantly sniffed it, as wary of him as he was of her.

“And who are you?”

The creature shuffled away, startled by his voice.

“It’s ok, it’s ok,” he said trying calm her, but it was no use. Like an explosion, she released a roar with the bottom of her belly.

“Bllllleeeeuuuuughhh!”

He fell back, momentarily afraid, but as the beast pushed the noise out her throat, the action propelled her backwards, falling comically on her rump.

He laughed as she fell silent, looking bashful.

“Are you and I going to be friends?”

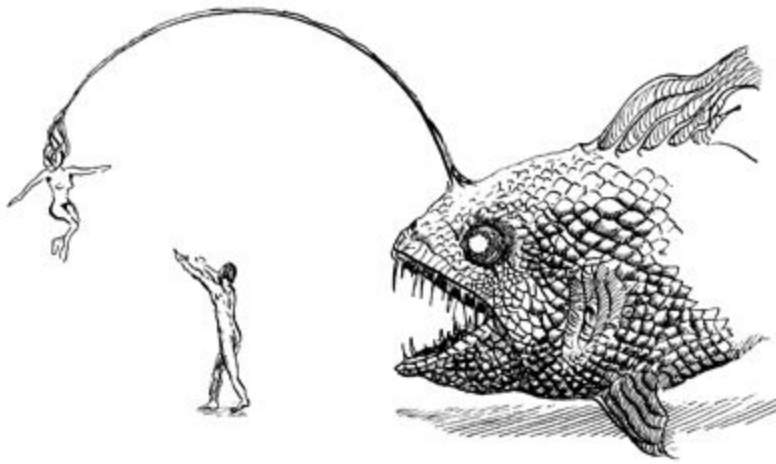
“Arf!”

He smiled, the fizzing gone from his head, memories starting to stick.

“You need a name,” he said, unsure as to how he would come up with anything appropriate. But then, against all logic, a name swam up from his fractured mind. If the Pope had been told, he would never have believed it. Once gone, things cannot return.

“Grace. I’ll call you Grace”

And with the name upon his lips, the Mariner felt a little less alone.



Epilogue

NOT EVERY STORY HAS A HAPPY ENDING

LIKE RAINWATER CASCADING THROUGH A filthy gutter, shame flushed out all other feelings from the boy's system as he lay prone across the bed. As usual that night he'd snuck into his parents' bedroom, aware they wanted him to sleep in his own, yet determined to feel that closeness supplied only by theirs. Being a toddler, he had little understanding of an adult's needs for privacy, nor did he have any concept of right and wrong, other than a rudimentary instinct instilled during the few years he'd been alive.

After complaining and whining he'd eventually won his way into their nest. His father was away, out of town for work, an absence that had weakened his mother's resolve to keep him out. With a warm feeling of safety he'd climbed into the bed, pulling the thick duvet up over his shoulders.

The boy thought it must have been his breathing that had caused the problem, as no other reason could be deduced in his infant mind. Sometimes his asthma made the air struggle as it escaped his lungs, causing a whistle out and a hiss in. This must have kept his mother awake longer than she could bear, and for that the boy was sorry. His mother meant the world to him. Sometimes he would imagine what he'd do if he saw her fall from a cliff; at the thought tears would come to his eyes (even though it were all a fiction) and he promised himself he would hurl his body after her. Better to be dead than to lose his mother.

And thus, the suggestion that he would deliberately keep her up at night was preposterous, and yet he must have, because clearly she'd become frustrated with his wheezing; a pillow was held tightly over his face, hard enough to block out any possible breath.

He wanted to struggle free. His mind and body were already revolting against the suffocation, auto-survival instincts telling him to thrash about, anything to reunite him with life-giving air. It were as if he were deep beneath the ocean, the water seeping into his throat, the pressure pushing down upon his lungs. But still he couldn't - no - wouldn't move.

But suddenly, a feeling... A sense triggered by the thought of the ocean, the feeling of water seeping into his lungs instead of the pillow against his face. He hadn't the words, but later in life he would recognise the peculiar sensation of repeating a moment, the feeling of *déjà vu*. He had drowned before.

Not again.

Never again.

This time he'd breathe.

He began to push, squirming until his tiny arms found purchase beneath the pillow. Slowly they strained, quivering, infant elbows shaking in the exertion of competing against an adult's. He wanted to stop, to give in to his mother's pressure and in that way please her. But that was wrong. He was just a boy. It didn't matter if he pushed the blame to her. Such blame was too great for an infant. A boy who deserved to breathe.

And suddenly the pillow was removed from his face, tiny lungs sucking in deep gasps of air, and his mother was pulling him into her arms and crying, saying over and over that she was sorry. It was her fault, not his. The blame was hers.

He hugged her back, because every boy loves his mother, and as she soaked his face with kisses he let himself forget the pillow and the pain. He let them go.

No need to take blame when there's no blame to hold. No need to dream that you cannot breathe.

Because some don't get a happy ending, but occasionally, just occasionally, they can get a happier beginning.

And for the first time in two or a billion lives, the Cog shifted.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ade Grant was born in Croydon, England and has never fully recovered.

Raised by wild beasts and nourished by the leavings at squat parties, Ade was finally rescued by Doctor Hayes and smuggled to a rehabilitation facility for ex-Croydonites, in a secret Brighton location. Slowly, over the course of several years, Ade was taught the basics of human interaction.

Ade Grant now writes fiction, poetry and politics, and can be found outside pharmacies in London, rooting through bins.

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